

*There are alternatives!*

*Markets and democratic  
experimentalism in early  
childhood education and care*

By Peter Moss



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53

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## ***There are alternatives!***

*Markets and democratic  
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childhood education and care*

By Peter Moss

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## Executive summary

This paper defines and compares two models for the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services: the market model, which is currently spreading and receiving increasing policy attention; and the model of democratic experimentalism, which has a low policy profile, though examples are given of where this model has been proposed or implemented. These are not the only models available, and the intention is not to prove that one model is objectively better than all others; that would not be possible. Rather the intention is to resist the hegemonic tendency of the market model, by arguing it is neither necessary nor inevitable; and to move discussion of ECEC services from technical to political and ethical questions by demonstrating that there are alternatives and, therefore, the need for democratic decision-making between these alternatives.

The first part of the paper is about the market model, based on a relationship of trade or exchange between two individuals, a purchaser and a provider. The model is an expression of neoliberalism's deepest values, assumptions and beliefs, and these are summarised. The paper describes the spread of this model, in particular in three countries (Australia, England and the Netherlands), considers its meaning and rationale, and examines the evidence (from both ECEC and schooling) of how the market model works in practice. A central argument is that the market model is based on certain understandings or social constructions about

people and services that are contestable and also to which people seem reluctant to conform. In particular, neither parents nor practitioners willingly adopt the role ascribed to them in the market model of *Homo economicus*, an autonomous and rational utility maximiser in pursuit of self-interest. Furthermore, there is evidence that for certain services many people are ambivalent about the market model, rejecting the trend towards treating everyone as 'consumers', seeing public services as different from the market-place and valuing their 'publicness'. Creating perfect, or even good enough, conditions for a well-functioning ECEC market is obviously problematic and, almost certainly, yet to be achieved.

The second part of the paper focuses on an alternative model for the provision of ECEC services: democratic experimentalism, a term drawn from the work of the Brazilian social theorist, Roberto Unger. Key terms – 'democracy' and 'experimentalism' – are defined. Democracy involves formal systems of government, but it is also about relationships and everyday practice; in Dewey's words, democracy is "primarily a mode of associated living embedded in the culture and social relationships of everyday life" (Dewey 1939: 2). Experimentation is about bringing something new to life, whether that something is a thought, knowledge, a service or a tangible product; like democracy, experimentation can have its more formal side, but it also represents

a way of living and relating that is open-ended (avoiding closure), open-minded (welcoming the unexpected) and open-hearted (valuing difference). This model is inscribed with different understandings, concepts, goals and values, compared to the market model. For example, early childhood services are understood as public responsibilities, places of encounter between citizens, children and adults, and as collaborative workshops, capable of many purposes and projects; in the market model, they are understood as factories for producing predetermined outcomes and as businesses. The model of democratic experimentalism is based on values of participation, dialogue, trust and choice; ‘choice’ figures as an important value in both models, but whereas the market model values individual consumer choice, democratic experimentalism values collective choice or decision-making.

Attention is paid to what democratic experimentalism might mean at different levels, from the national to the local to the individual ECEC service: what are the roles of national and local governments and how might a nursery practice democratic experimentalism? Consideration is also given to the conditions needed to nurture and support democratic experimentalism, including: understandings, values, tools, an educated workforce, research and time. Although democratic experimentalism is less

familiar today than the market model, examples do exist of where it has been proposed or implemented, and some of these examples are presented (though the process of exemplification, and more generally the ability to evaluate democratic experimentalism and understand its potential, is hampered by the lack of systematic attention paid to this model in policy or research).

Finally the paper compares what the two models might mean for how ECEC systems are structured, covering areas such as access, type of service, management, workforce and funding. For example, the market model favours demand-side funding of parent-consumers, while the model of democratic experimentalism requires supply-side funding representing the shared responsibility for children of communities and parents.

The paper concludes by arguing for the need for democratic societies to value and promote alternatives and that, in reality, models are never as pure or distinct as on paper, with variants and overlaps. But even taking account of this, real differences remain and real choices need to be made. More attention needs to be paid to defining different policy directions in ECEC and to the conditions that might be needed to follow them.

## Introduction

“Any vision of education that takes democracy seriously cannot but be at odds with educational reforms which espouse the language and values of market forces and treat education as a commodity to be purchased and consumed. ... ‘Freedom of choice’ will be a major principle in determining educational policy, [but] the notion of ‘choice’ will not simply refer to the rights of individuals to pursue their narrow self-interests in a competitive marketplace. Instead it will be recognised that, *in a democracy, individuals do not only express personal preferences; they also make public and collective choices related to the common good of their society.*”

(Carr and Hartnett 1996: 192; emphasis added)

This paper is a contribution to democratic debate about an important field of service provision – early childhood education and care (ECEC) – though its argument applies in large measure to schools. There are different models of provision for ECEC services, including centralised state-run systems and the provision of services by workplaces. But today, a particular model is increasingly prevalent, spreading from the English-speaking liberal market economies into Continental Europe and beyond. In the ‘market model’ provision is delivered through markets, in which consumers shop for and purchase services on offer from a variety of competing suppliers.

The paper attempts two tasks. First, to look at the market model for delivering ECEC services and what evidence there is about how it works in practice. Second, to outline another model, which is termed ‘democratic experimentalism’ (a term coined by Roberto Unger (2004), whose ideas I will discuss further). In doing so, I will compare these models across a number of fields: the different rationalities, values and understandings that underpin them; the implications of each for the structuring of service systems and the roles of different levels of government; and the conditions needed for these models to work well in their own terms.

My aim, to quote the title of an earlier paper (Moss 2007a), is to bring politics into ‘the nursery’, a term I use sometimes as shorthand for the whole of early childhood education and care, and to assert that ECEC is first and foremost a political and ethical undertaking, not a technical one. What do I mean? Drawing on Mouffe’s distinction, ‘politics’ can be understood as practice: “[Politics is] an ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish order and organise human coexistence in conditions that are potentially conflictual ... politics domesticates hostility”; while the ‘political’ can be understood as expressing and negotiating the conflictual in life, recognising a “dimension of antagonism inherent in human relations” (Mouffe 2000: 101). Though I would qualify Mouffe’s definition

of the political with another view that the political involves taking responsibility for that which is of common concern (Biesta 2004); the ‘political’, therefore, might be said to encompass issues that are both of public interest and subject to disagreement, while by ‘ethical’ I refer to how we should practice our relationships to other people, other species and our environment.

Technical practice (means, strategies and techniques) is important, too; we can and should ask the technical question ‘what works?’ But this practice and this question should follow from and be subordinate to political and ethical practice, as well as to critical questions of a political and ethical nature. What is the purpose of early childhood education and care? What values and principles should it embody and promote? What is its image of the child, the parent, the early childhood worker, the early childhood service? What are the possibilities of ECEC and what are the dangers? What is our vision of the future?

Speaking more specifically, I mean to continue in this paper an earlier exploration of how ECEC services can be places not just of political practice but, more specifically, of *democratic* political practice (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Moss 2007a). For democracy to flourish, there needs to be a recognition and valuing of plurality, a view that there is more than one way to do things, more than one answer to every question, more than one perspective that needs to be brought into the debate. One of the problems with the market model discourse is that it has sought ‘hegemonic globalisation’,

what Santos (2004) refers to as “the successful globalisation of a particular local and culturally specific discourse to the point that it makes universal truth claims and ‘localises’ all rival discourses” (p. 149). This is akin to Foucault’s concepts of ‘dominant discourses’ or ‘regimes of truth’. What this means in practice is that one perspective or one specific local practice comes to claim that it is the only truth and that there is no alternative: the more successful this hegemonic claim, the more its assumptions and values become invisible, its subjective claims are presented as objective truths, and it determines what is deemed self-evident and practical. Then, what is simply one view, one local discourse, one possible way for things to be, can come to seem universal and necessary, neutral and natural.

By bringing politics into the nursery, I want to ‘denaturalise’ and ‘relativise’ the market model, in other words, to show that it is not neutral and neither a natural nor an inevitable process but instead just one alternative among many for providing ECEC services. I focus attention on one of the possible alternatives (democratic experimentalism), but I make no claim that this is the only one available. I have no wish to create a binary opposition, as if markets and democratic experimentalism were the only two models available to us. It is not a case of ‘either/or’ – that we must go for ‘markets’ or ‘democratic experimentalism’ – but rather a case of ‘and, and, and’, the possibility of several or even many alternatives.

Nor do I claim that one model is inherently and objectively better than the other. I will review

evidence – some of it critical – on how markets in ECEC work in practice. But basically I am dealing here with two views of the world that have very different rationalities, values, understandings and goals; different people, therefore, will come to different conclusions about which model is best, not on the basis of ‘what works’ or ‘evidence-based’ practice, but depending on their values, their understandings, and their views about the purposes of ECEC.

At heart, this is a paper about responsibility. My argument is that we – citizens of democratic societies – cannot escape responsibility for real choices that confront us in ECEC (and elsewhere), by deferring to the invisible hand of the market or the truth claims of experts. There is no philosopher’s stone that, once discovered, will magically solve the dilemmas of public services, freeing us from the responsibility, uncertainty and anxiety of making difficult judgements and attempting complex activities. The questions facing us, which will not go away, is what shall we choose and how shall we choose?

The original version of this paper, prepared for and published by Bertelsmann Stiftung (Moss, 2008a), was written in 2007, a time that in some respects seems an age away. It was before the current financial and economic crisis had broken across the world, when market momentum seemed almost unstoppable, fuelled by an almost religious belief in markets’ infallibility (if left to their own devices), when few people outside the financial services industry had heard of credit derivatives or securitisation,

when for most of us Lehman Brothers might as well have been a boy band for all we knew about investment banks. Today much has changed. While few would deny a role of some kind for markets, many more are asking what that role should be and under what conditions; markets are perhaps more readily seen as part of life, not a way of life. This, too, puts into contention the relationship between markets and the state, with the latter having to assume clear responsibility for the common good and rectifying some of the damage caused by the workings of the former. Some just hope to return to how things were in 2007, others are asking if this is either possible or desirable. The crisis then creates fear and deep insecurity, but it also opens up space for alternatives – it does a better job of denaturalising and relativising the market discourse than any number of discussion papers!

The radically changed context is one obvious difference from the first version of this paper. Another difference concerns the content. I have developed or added a number of sections, saying more about:

- the relationship between the rise of the market model and the rise of neoliberalism;
- the experience of the market model in compulsory schooling;
- the meanings of democracy and experimentation, adding a new example of experimentation in ECEC;
- the distinction between ‘teaching citizenship’ and ‘learning democracy’;
- the conditions needed for democratic

experimentalism, including the role of research;

- Roberto Unger’s ideas on democratic experimentalism.

A final difference is in the title, which emphasises the theme of choice and responsibility, and is inspired by Unger’s observation that the “world suffers under a dictatorship of no alternatives. Although ideas all by themselves are powerless to overthrow this dictatorship, we cannot overthrow it without ideas” (Unger 2005b: 1).

The paper is organised into nine sections, with two main parts. The first part is about the **market model**. The first section of this part charts *the growing reach of the market model*, with examples drawn in particular from Australia, England and the Netherlands; the second explores *the meaning of and rationale for this model*, what it entails and the case made for it; the third reviews some *evidence on how the market model works in practice*.

The second part of the paper is about an **alternative model**, what I term democratic experimentalism. I devote more space to this than to the market model, partly because it will be less familiar to many readers. The first section of this part outlines *the model of democratic experimentalism*, including its values, understandings, concepts and goals. The second section

presents *some examples*, to make the point that democratic experimentalism is not just an abstract model; we can learn from experience. The third section looks in detail at *what this model might mean in practice at different levels*, from national government to individual service. The final section in this part considers what *conditions may be necessary* for democratic experimentalism to take root and grow, just as the market model requires certain conditions to flourish.

In the penultimate section I contrast *what the two models might mean for the way ECEC systems are structured*, covering areas such as access, type of service, management, workforce and funding. The final section offers some *concluding reflections* on how far the two models need be viewed as totally distinct and mutually exclusive opposites; it serves as a reminder of the diversity and messiness of the real world when compared with the modeller’s blueprints. However, even if differences are not necessarily so clear-cut in practice as in theory, the basic argument holds. There are different ways of thinking about, organising and practising ECEC, and choices need to be made – even if they are nuanced – in the process of democratic debate and negotiation. What is needed now is further work to support such debate and negotiation, in particular articulating, researching, evaluating and experimenting with the different directions open to us.

## Chapter 1: The market model

“The marketisation of early childhood services has been promoted in recent years in OECD countries. ... To limit public expenditure, and allow greater choice and control by parents are among the reasons advanced. Vouchers and parent subsidies are favoured over direct funding of services in the expectation that parental purchase of services will bring private entrepreneurs, new funding and greater dynamism into the provision of services – all this with lesser cost to government.”

(OECD 2006: 115)

### The growing reach of the market model

The appeal of market solutions for ECEC services has been most apparent in the countries of the English-speaking world. These countries are often referred to as liberal market economies and have long been identified with what Esping-Andersen (1990, 1999) has termed a liberal welfare state, characterised by a narrowly defined role for the state and the encouragement of the market in the provision of welfare services. ECEC services were slower to develop here than in many Continental European countries, and their rapid expansion over the last 15 to 20 years has relied strongly on private, often for-profit (FP) providers. This expansion has also occurred in a context of resurgent liberalism – economic neoliberalism and political advanced liberalism (Rose 1999) – supported

by the growing influence of public choice and public management theories that have helped to depoliticise neoliberalism and market models, making them appear necessary, natural and neutral (Hay 2007).

But neoliberalism is intensely political: it is neither necessary, natural nor neutral but is the product of political process and choices. The market model is an expression of neoliberalism’s deepest values, assumptions and beliefs. It is important, therefore, to understand these ideas in order to understand the rationale and process of marketisation.

- *Competition* is at the heart of neoliberalism: “Competition is central because it separates the sheep from the goats, the men from the boys, the fit from the unfit. It is supposed to allocate all resources, whether physical, natural, human or financial with the greatest possible efficiency” (George 1999: 3). Competition works through markets, “seen as the ideal mechanisms for the automatic co-ordination of the decisions of a multitude of individual actors in the best interests of all”. All kinds of practices – health, security, welfare and more – are being “restructured according to a particular image of the economic, the market” (Rose 1999: 146).
- *Individual* choice fuels competition and competition increases individual choice, involving finely calibrated calculations of

preferences, costs and benefits to self and, perhaps, to the immediate family: “Modern individuals are not merely ‘free to choose’, but obliged to be free, to understand and enact their lives in terms of choice” (Rose 1999: 87).

- Relationships of all kinds are reduced to *contractual relations* between autonomous individuals. Everything in principle can be treated as a commodity and is therefore for sale, the ultimate criterion of value is monetary, and the individual is truly empowered by the market: “The market is presumed to work as an appropriate guide – an ethic – for all human actions” (Harvey 2005: 165).
- *Inequality* is both inevitable and beneficial, being the spur to competition.
- *Suspicion of democratic politics* is characteristic of this model: markets are inhibited by politics and “governance by majority rule is seen as a potential threat to individual rights and constitutional liberties. ... Neoliberals therefore tend to favour governance by experts and elites” (Harvey 2005: 66).
- *Suspicion of anything public*, which is defined as inherently inefficient and hindering competition, is also common. Public assets should be privatised, public spaces are either eliminated or increasingly colonised by private interests (most visibly, the remorseless spread of advertising and sponsorship), and private business solutions

are preferred to public provision of goods and services.

- *Hyper-individualism*, or privileging the self-regulating and self-forming autonomous subject, is key, and was expressed by Margaret Thatcher in her famous statement that “there is no such thing as society”<sup>1</sup>. Collective action and public institutions undermine this autonomous subject (creating ‘dependency’) as well as obstructing the workings of the market, which should be constituted of individual agents with individual rights engaged in transactions unaffected by group interests or collusion.
- *The social and the political collapse into the economic and managerial*: “All aspects of social behaviour are reconceptualised along economic lines” (Rose 1999: 141) and contentious issues are depoliticised and left to the market and management.
- A process of *repositivisation* occurs to meet neoliberalism’s “rage for accountability”; it is based on measurability, meeting a reductive need for and belief in simplicity, certainty and objectivity, and on pinning its hopes on a “social science of variables” that claims an accurate, stable and ultimate representation of reality (Lather 2006: 784).

If these ideas are the drivers of marketisation, the consequences of this process for ECEC services can be most clearly seen in Australia and England. Until the early 1990s, ‘childcare’<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, talking to *Women’s Own* magazine, 31 October 1987



in Australia was mainly provided by not-for-profit (NFP) private providers. But policy changes between 1991 and 2000, mostly in funding, led to a rapid increase in services, together with FP providers, marketisation and corporatisation. Between 1991 and 2001, the number of places in FP 'childcare' services increased almost 400 percent compared to 55 percent in NFP services, and the disparate growth rate continued subsequently; by 2004, fewer than 30 percent of children were in NFP services (Summison 2006). The first corporate 'childcare' business floated on the Australian Stock Exchange in 2001, with three other companies following. One of these companies, ABC Learning, grew to become the largest 'childcare' business in the world today, a multinational corporation owning over 2300 centres in Australia, New Zealand, the US, Canada and the UK (Veevers 2006) and valued in 2007 at AUS\$ 2.9 billion (€ 1.54 billion)<sup>3</sup> (Bartholomeusz 2007).

This ambitious venture in globalised and corporatised 'childcare' has since come to grief. Shares in ABC Learning fell from February 2008 when the scale of its debts first became apparent, then the company went into receivership in November 2008, owing nearly AUS\$ 1 billion (€ 531 million). The federal government in Australia has had to provide financial support to ensure the continued opening of nurseries

providing for 100,000 Australian children, and various organisations are now looking to buy up nurseries sold off by the stricken company.

It is difficult to judge the wider or longer-term significance of this particular experience with one company based in one country. No other FP provider comes anywhere close in size of operation or global spread, and ABC Learning can simply be written off as a maverick operation, unlikely to recur. Against this view, it can be treated as a warning of what marketisation is capable of producing, and therefore of the risks in a system combining markets and business and which cannot divorce itself from the wider economic context. ABC Learning illustrates how ownership can become over-concentrated, leading to potential abuse of dominant market positions (there have been accusations that ABC Learning used its position to put smaller competitors out of business) and the exposure of large numbers of children, families and workers to fallout from bad management. It also suggests that, as in banking, governments cannot allow large 'childcare' corporations to collapse, leading to the socialising of costs and the privatisation of profit.

The UK has seen similar rapid growth in a 'childcare' market dominated by private FP providers, though without the emergence of

<sup>2</sup> I place 'childcare' in inverted commas to emphasise that this is a constructed concept or understanding of ECEC services; it is neither self-evident nor neutral. Later in the paper, I explain the concept further and contrast it with other concepts. For a fuller discussion and critique of the 'childcare' concept, see Moss (2006).

<sup>3</sup> All currency conversions are for rates of exchange on April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2009, using Yahoo Currency Converter, <<http://finance.yahoo.com/currency-converter?>>

any corporate giant such as ABC Learning. In 1997 the private nursery sector was estimated to be worth £ 1.5 billion (€ 1.65 billion), rising to £ 3.5 billion (€ 3.84 billion) in 2006. The biggest growth was in corporate providers, with the 20 largest owners between them providing nearly 60,000 places (about 8 percent of total nursery places) (Blackburn 2007), including nearly 4000 places run by Busy Bees, a chain of centres sold by a private equity company to ABC Learning at the end of 2006<sup>4</sup>. The overall ‘childcare’ market, however, remains fragmented, certainly compared to what occurred in Australia. Nearly 80 percent of the nursery sector in 2006 was accounted for by FP providers, divided almost equally between ‘sole traders’ (i.e. an owner with one nursery) and private companies; NFP and public providers each accounted for 11 percent.

As in Australia, the growth of a market in ‘childcare’ has been deliberate public policy in the UK, under both Conservative and Labour governments, supported by the introduction of demand-side funding arrangements (income-related payments to parents) intended to underpin market growth by reducing ‘market failure’ arising from lower-income families being unable to access private providers. In England, the government’s Ten Year Strategy for Childcare, published in 2004 (HM Treasury 2004), and the Childcare Act 2006 require local

authorities to actively manage the market to secure sufficient childcare for working parents:

“[L]ocal authorities take the strategic lead in their local childcare market, planning, supporting and commissioning childcare. ... Local authorities will not be expected to provide childcare direct but will be expected to work with local private, voluntary and independent sector providers to meet local need.”

(Sure Start Unit 2006)

Recently, in its update of the Ten Year Strategy, the English Government commits to setting out “clearer expectations of Local Authorities’ duty to actively manage the market ... [and to] reduce ‘market failure’ as far as possible” (HM Government 2009: 7). It is, the report asserts, “Governments’ job – both central and local – to provide strategic leadership through effective market management and accountability” (p. 11).

In some important respects ‘early education’ is treated differently from ‘childcare’, with an entitlement to free part-time provision for three- and four-year-olds, based on supply funding (i.e. direct to services). But provision of this service follows a market model; it can be supplied by any provider – public or private, school or nursery – meeting certain conditions,

<sup>4</sup> Busy Bees was one of three companies bought by ABC Learning at the end of 2006 for a total of US\$522m in cash. The largest deal was for the takeover of Chicago-based La Petite Academy from JPMorgan Partners, a financial services company, for \$330m, making the Australian group the second largest ‘childcare services group’ in the US, with over 1000 centres. Eddy Groves, the chief executive of ABC learning, has said that the purchase of Busy Bees is “a starting point for further expansion into the fragmented UK market and throughout Europe” (Veevers, 2006: 4); the collapse of the company has nullified this ambition.

in return for which the supplier receives a nursery education grant. In 2008, 95 percent of three- and four-year-olds were attending free early education, but whereas the majority of four-year-olds received their entitlement in schools, most three-year-olds received theirs in private provision, both FP and NFP (Department for Children, Schools and Families [England] 2008).

An active market policy has gained a foothold on Continental Europe, in the Netherlands. Recent legislation (*Wet Kinderopvang*, the Childcare Act), introduced in 2005, redirects funding from providers to parents, it replaces a supply-side funding system, operated by local government, with a demand-led childcare market (Lloyd 2008). The Act envisaged a ‘tripartite’ method of funding childcare, shared between central government, parents and employers. Employers were expected to pay a third of costs, leaving parents to pay the remainder, although most parents received an income-related payment from the state in the form of a tax credit. However, because voluntary payments by employers fell short of government expectations, employment contributions are now compulsory, through adding a supplement to existing unemployment premiums paid by all employers.

“The explicit objectives of this [2005] reform are to increase parental choice and stimulate

the operation of market forces” (Marangos and Plantenga 2006: 18), through the change in funding regime and substantial deregulation. One result has been a growing market share for FP providers, from an already high level; in 2004, about 60 percent of childcare organisations had FP status (Noailly, Visser and Grout 2007). The reform also brought informal carers such as grandparents into the system, including payment, but this has led to rocketing costs and changes to be introduced in 2011, which will impose new conditions and reduce funding for informal care (Lloyd 2008).

While both England and the Netherlands have adopted an explicit market approach to the provision of ECEC services, there are some national variations in practice, most notably: more employer involvement in contributing to costs in the Netherlands<sup>5</sup> and a stronger regulatory role for government in England, with services subject to inspection by a national agency against national standards, as well as direct government investment to develop services in economically disadvantaged areas. (However, this investment is short-term, all services being expected in the long term to succeed unaided in the market.)

A final example of the Continental spread of marketisation is Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium bordering the Netherlands.

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<sup>5</sup> A 2007 report on the nursery market in England concludes that employer contributions rose rapidly between 2005 and 2006 due to new tax relief measures, and that employers in 2006 accounted for 18 percent of total market income; this compares to 71 percent of income from parent fees or £2.5 billion. By comparison, demand subsidies to parents, in the form of tax credits, amounted to £360 million – or 10 percent of total market income (Blackburn, 2007).

In recent years, a publicly funded system of nurseries has been first supplemented and now overtaken by a burgeoning private and unsubsidised sector, dependent on parental fees. Between 2000 and 2007, according to the annual reports of Kind & Gezin (the agency responsible for regulating childcare services), the former provision grew some 13 percent, from 13,652 to 15,438 places; but over the same period the number of entirely private centres grew by 60 percent, from 15,064 to 24,137.

### **The market model: Meaning and rationale**

What is behind this growing policy interest in market solutions to the delivery of ECEC? What is meant by a ‘market model? What are the assumptions, values and understandings on which it is based? What are the attractions of the approach? Mostly the answers are of general applicability, not just specific to ECEC. They constitute a mindset, a way of seeing and understanding the world, people and the relationships between them.

As already noted, the market model is a product of neoliberal thinking and the growing influence of this type of capitalism (sometimes, in fact, called ‘market capitalism’) since the 1970s. The market model of ECEC is inscribed with the thinking of neoliberalism, which constructs a particular understanding of the world we live in and the people who populate it. In particular, this thinking divides people into ‘purchasers’ (or ‘customers’) and ‘providers’ (or ‘sellers’), coming together in a market place to trade a

commodity (for example, ‘childcare’). The purchaser should have a degree of choice between competing providers and, having chosen, should enter into a direct contractual relationship, in which the chosen provider supplies a commodity – goods or services – to an agreed specification and price. Since purchasing power is unlikely to be equal, the market is supposed to produce goods of varying cost and quality, which can be matched to individual preferences and means; some purchasers will be able to pay for de luxe services, others must settle for economy models. The market, therefore, is a unique mechanism for creating a relationship between purchasers and providers, based on what has been termed an ‘exchange paradigm’: “The logic of the exchange paradigm requires an equal payment for each need-satisfying good” (Vaughan and Estola 2007: 246).

The case for the market, however, goes well beyond simply being a convenient means to match purchasers and providers. The market model, its advocates claim, is better able to: meet needs and preferences (choice); drive up standards (quality); provide best value for money (efficiency); protect consumers against the self-interest and overweening power of providers (empowerment); improve or close failing services (discipline); and stimulate new solutions to meet unmet and new consumer demands (innovation).

“Those who favour demand-side funding [i.e. subsidising parents directly, rather than services] typically believe that markets work relatively well, that it is very important

to preserve parental choice over a range of childcare services, that parental choice will enforce competition between different potential suppliers of childcare, that this competition will ensure that services are produced at the lowest possible cost for the quality chosen, and that suppliers will constantly seek to innovate in order to attract parental dollars. Most advocates for demand-side funding also believe that private for-profit suppliers will respond best to these market incentives.”

(Cleveland and Krashinsky 2004: 2–3)

Competition, as this quotation makes clear, is the force driving services to deliver these benefits; alongside individual choice, competition is a central value of the market approach, since it supposedly ensures the allocation of resources with the greatest possible efficiency.

To achieve a competitive market that will produce what the consumer wants at the lowest possible price, certain conditions are assumed to be necessary:

- *well-informed consumers* who know what they want and are willing to shop around for the best buy – i.e. “rewarding [childcare] providers who meet their expectations of quality at a price they can afford” (HM Treasury 2004: 47) – and, if subsequently dissatisfied, to switch their custom from one provider to another;
- *sufficient supply*, both of individual services and of organisations supplying services to ensure choice and competition;
- *subsidy for lower-income consumers* (‘demand-side funding’) that will enable them to fully access the market;
- *a ‘level playing field’*, so that all providers operate under the same constraints and conditions.

There is, however, a more fundamental condition. The market model is based on certain understandings (or, put another way, images or social constructions) of people, relationships and institutions. It understands subjects (both the purchaser/consumer and the provider) to be competitive, profit-seeking agents, each making individual decisions about how best to maximise gain for themselves (and, in some cases, their immediate family). The image is economic man (*Homo economicus*), an autonomous and rational utility maximiser in pursuit of self-interest. This requires a very particular way of viewing the world; as individual consumers “we see ourselves surrounded by a world in which everything is potentially a commodity for sale ... the subject position on offer is the de-raced, de-classed and de-gendered ‘possessive individual’” (Apple 2005: 16–17).

The actions and relationships of this subject are shaped by a calculative and economic rationality, a process described by Nikolas Rose in his exploration of the newly dominant politics of advanced liberalism that complements the spread of marketisation:

“[As advanced liberalism develops,] the relation of the social and the economic is rethought. All aspects of social behaviour

are now reconceptualised along economic lines – as calculative actions undertaken through the universal human faculty of choice. Choice is to be seen as dependent upon a relative assessment of costs and benefits of ‘investment’. ... All manner of social undertakings – health, welfare, education, insurance – can be reconstrued in terms of their contribution to the development of human capital.

(Rose 1999: 141–142)

Within this market rationality, services are understood as producers and suppliers of a particular commodity and parents as potential consumers, or customers, calculating the best buy given their needs, preferences and what they can afford. The product for sale in the ECEC market is most often ‘childcare’ or, to be more precise, ‘quality childcare’<sup>6</sup>, representing the commodification and transfer to the market of a ‘household service’, formerly produced within the home by the unpaid work of women; other ‘household services’ that can similarly be commodified and marketised include cleaning, cooking and eldercare (Yeandle et al. 1999). The ‘childcare’ service can, therefore, be understood as the producer of a commodity, supplied to the purchaser in exchange for her money. Today the commodity may well include not only a certain quantity of care delivered to a defined specifi-

cation but also certain predefined educational and developmental outcomes.

‘Childcare’ services that fail to meet their specification and to deliver their advertised outcomes, or that are unresponsive to changing consumer needs, will prove uncompetitive and be punished by parents-as-consumers who do not choose them in the first place or who, as dissatisfied customers, switch to other providers. According to the market model, therefore, ‘childcare’ service must respond to market demands or close, and their users and staff move on elsewhere.

This discussion of the market approach has assumed a dualistic relationship between purchaser and provider. In practice, especially in fields where a public policy interest is identified, the state is highly likely to intervene to mediate market relationships. The result is what has been described as a ‘quasi-market’ (Whitty et al. 1998), where the government controls such matters as entry by new providers, investment, the quality of service and price; it may even fund all or part of the cost of services, subsidising the service either directly or indirectly via transfers to purchasers. Here the state retains and supports the direct purchaser-provider relationship, but steers the relationship indirectly and at a distance. Moreover, as the above comparison

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<sup>6</sup> The product can also be, as in the case of England, ‘early education’. Countries with strong market models often combine a market model of ‘childcare’ with public programmes of targeted services intended to provide early intervention for a minority of ‘disadvantaged’ children (e.g. Head Start in the USA, Sure Start in the UK). The active role of the state, including supply funding of targeted services, is justified in terms of the inability of the market by itself to respond to the needs of this group of families and the inability of the group to access the market.

of England and the Netherlands shows, markets can be mediated by government and others (e.g. employers) in different ways and to different degrees; the ‘market model’, therefore, should not be regarded as homogeneous.

Finally, it is important to make some distinctions. The movement towards a market model may be accompanied by an increase in *private* provision, in particular services provided for profit, i.e. those run as businesses; the emergence of *corporatisation*, i.e. services provided by public companies quoted on national stock exchanges; and the introduction or extension of *demand-side funding*, by which parents rather than services are subsidised, usually to enable their improved access as consumers to marketised services. These trends often coincide because the same rationality that values markets also values services provided as businesses and the funding of parent consumers rather than service suppliers.

But the association is not inevitable or necessary. Services that are directly publicly funded, even publicly run, can operate within a market or at least a ‘quasi-market’; for example, central or local government-funded schools may compete for pupils, both with each other and with private schools. Moreover, even a cursory look across Europe will show that ‘private providers’ of ECEC services come in many shapes and sizes, with varying histories and relationships to the welfare state, some going back many years: national, regional and local NGOs, both secular and religious; local community groups; co-operatives; workplaces; and businesses,

small, medium and large (Humblet 2006). So within a market-based model, the details can vary considerably, and ‘private providers’ need not be FP businesses or corporations.

### How does the market work in practice?

There is, by now, a substantial literature on the relative merits of for-profit and not-for-profit ECEC services. Researchers “generally find that non-profit centres produce higher quality services” (Cleveland et al. 2007: 28). This is usually attributed to FP providers spending less on resources associated with quality, especially staffing:

“[N]on-profits make different decisions about inputs (and appear to have higher quality objectives) than for-profits in childcare. Non-profits consistently hire better-trained staff, encourage them to [pursue] professional development and remunerate their staff better than FP centres. But, partly this greater production of quality appears to go beyond the different input decisions that non-profits make. Under the right conditions, a culture of quality appears to develop in non-profit childcare organisations, producing a quality level that is more than the sum of its parts.

(Cleveland et al. 2007: 17)

A study on the financial sustainability of private ECEC services in Flanders, published in 2004, documented that this marketised sector created especially low-quality jobs, in which very often the legislation on social security was bypassed.



It also documented high staff turnover, which can be a major risk for quality if qualifications are low (Mispelon et al. 2004). While a study of the ‘childcare’ workforce in England, based on analyses of the Labour Force Survey for 2001–2005, found that though pay overall was low, just over the minimum wage, it was considerably lower in the FP sector at 72 percent of the level in the NFP and public sectors (Simon et al. 2008).

As already noted, studies comparing types of providers do not necessarily throw light on market approaches. Markets can operate in countries with very different mixes of provider types; Canada, for example, has fewer FP services than Australia, the Netherlands and the UK. Cleveland et al. (2007) do, however, draw attention to one specific instance in Canada where there is a relationship between provider type and market functioning. In what they term ‘thin’ markets (i.e. where there are relatively few children in an area), they find the difference between NFP and FP services disappears. They suggest:

“[I]n thin markets there is no opportunity for non-profits to produce and sell a differentiated service – differentiated in higher quality. ... In thin markets, there are not many parents with the demand and income to support higher-quality services. ... In thick markets, there is a sufficient mass of geographically concentrated potential

consumers to allow non-profits to aim for the higher quality end of the market (while commercial centres go for the lower end).”

(Cleveland et al. 2007: 15)

Focusing more specifically on the functioning of markets, Sumsion has described the primacy of market forces since the early 1990s in Australian childcare, driven by government commitment to “consumer choice, competitiveness, profit maximisation and a downsizing of government’s role in favour of private sector expansion ... and the assumption that privatisation will enhance the efficiency of childcare provision” (2006: 101). However, as she goes on to note, there is a “lack of empirical evidence to support assertions about the ‘automatic superiority’ (Crouch 2003: 9) of market-dominated provision of social services generally (Meagher 2004) and childcare specifically”; and that “on the contrary, in Australia and internationally, evidence abounds of an ‘imperfect’ market for childcare services that fails to conform to the principles of so-called market rationality” (Sumsion 2006: 101).

As Sumsion’s reference to ‘imperfect’ markets implies, most evidence concerns how well markets actually work in practice. A recent study in England throws some light on what is termed the ‘supply side’, i.e. the supply of services to the market. The study, for the English Department of Education and Skills (DfES)<sup>7</sup>, is by the global accountancy firm PricewaterhouseCoopers,

<sup>7</sup> The Department’s remit has since been expanded, to include for instance child welfare, and it has been renamed the Department for Children, Schools and Families.



and is entitled Children's services markets. The overall report begins by stating the government funder's aim, highlighting the centrality of the market model in English policy: "The DfES wishes to develop an evidence-based strategy for developing the market in children's services, which are identified as education, social care, health and other services for children, young people and families" (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2006a: 3). Four separate reports follow, including one on 'childcare'.

Private providers, in the childcare study, voice concerns about the impact of publicly supported initiatives and services, including children's centres and schools. There is a risk of provision closing due to what is perceived to be an uneven playing field producing unfair competition: "The feedback we gathered from the PVI [private, voluntary and independent] providers who have settings in areas exposed to a less favourable market environment suggests that increased local competition is a key factor, but some believe that additional local capacity in children's centres and schools is having a significant impact" (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2006b: 5). The resultant "losses may not discriminate between high and low quality capacity (which) would hamper market development" (p. 6).

A second risk is inadequate supply of services for certain groups: "The capacity developed may not suit the nature of local demand, e.g. in areas where cultural factors impact demand for childcare; [and] a proportion of the market may remain underserved, e.g. working families

unable to afford the full-cost childcare places" (p. 7). The overall report identifies a number of problems in markets for children's services in general, including: local authorities not having "a strong sense of what the vision for their local market could, or should, be"; local authorities' difficulty in managing markets; and uneven playing fields between public and private providers (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2006a: 5–7).

A well-functioning market also involves a demand side – that is, the way consumers relate to the market; in particular, it requires an informed consumer who is willing and able to act as *Homo economicus*. 'Consumers' need information about price and quality and to process that information efficiently, to calculate 'best value', to make initial choices and then to monitor those choices once made, all the time against the criterion of what is in their own (and perhaps their family's) best interests. But, in practice, this perfectly honed calculation may prove hard to achieve.

*Homo economicus* has been the subject of increasing scepticism as a basis for predicting how people will behave. In particular, the work of a new generation of behavioural economists, who apply the psychology of human behaviour to micro-economic decisions, has cast doubt on the existence of the 'species': "It is no longer axiomatic that the majority of people, the majority of the time, can be assumed to make choices that are unambiguously in their best interests. ... The mystery isn't why we make so many poor economic choices, but why we persist in accepting economic theory that predicts we

are biased toward making good ones” (Hutton and Schneider 2008: 16). As a British newspaper columnist observed, the work of behavioural economists has led to the “blindingly obvious discovery that economists’ reductionist view of humans as rational economic units is nonsense: people’s motivations are just as often not financially motivated, which explains why economists are not very good at predicting even tomorrow’s stock market movement, let alone the next crash” (Toynbee 2008).

Market-based ECEC services provide some evidence supporting this sceptical view. Canadian researchers observe that “many parents have never purchased childcare before, and by the time they learn what they need to know, their children are old enough so that the parents may never purchase childcare again”. Furthermore, working parents have “little time to seek out and evaluate childcare, even if they knew entirely what they were looking for” (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2002: 39). The same researchers, with colleagues, develop this argument further in a critique of voucher schemes – one form of ‘demand subsidy’ intended to enhance parental choice. Unless the use of vouchers is limited to services meeting stringent conditions, which will reduce choice, then vouchers may have deleterious consequences for children:

“While parents are generally very good judges of the needs and characteristics of their children, it is difficult to judge the child-development characteristics of care situations. And, because quality is difficult to judge, childcare providers, particularly

those offering on a commercial basis, generally have incentives to claim higher quality than they do in fact deliver (Walker 1992). So, while vouchers will encourage parents to spend more on childcare, and while they do offer parental choice, they are not a particularly good way to ensure that high-quality childcare is both more affordable and more widely used.”

(Cleveland et al. 2008: 29)

The English Government’s key ‘childcare strategy’ document concedes similar problems:

Although the quality of childcare experience is vital to child outcomes, there is evidence to suggest that parents do not accurately observe the quality of the childcare they use. ... [A recent American study] suggested that parents significantly overestimate quality; do not use all available information when judging quality; and incorrectly believe that certain observable characteristics are indicative of non-observable quality.”

(HM Treasury 2004: 67)

Experience in the Netherlands confirms that:

“[I]nformation is a real problem. The consumers [assumed to be parents] do not know every supplier and quite often receive information through informal networks. Furthermore the consumer is only partly able to check the quality of services. ... As a form of self-regulation, the sector has adopted a quality agreement with rules about a pedagogical plan, child–staff ratios,

group size and accommodation. Parents, though, seem to value different aspects of quality, for example active play, the provision of different activities and short journeys. As a result, parents may overestimate a service's quality. ... Parents also appear to have little knowledge of the cost of childcare."

(Marangos and Plantenga 2006: 19)

Another Dutch report sums up the problem: "Parents and government simply cannot be present full-time while the service is being rendered and therefore a residual informational deficit or asymmetry will remain" (Noailly et al. 2007: 23).

Cleveland and Krashinsky raise a further complication about the consumer's role in the 'childcare' (or 'early education') market. Who is the consumer for these services? Most studies of and advocates for the market assume parents are the primary consumers. But, arguably, children are the direct consumers, with most first-hand experience of the commodity sold on the market, and they "cannot easily communicate with the parent about what kind of care is being delivered" (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2002: 39). They are also unlikely to have a strong voice in the original choice of service; indeed, they have no recognised place in the exchange transaction – reference to children's rights is noticeably absent in the market model. For example, the report of PricewaterhouseCoopers (2006a) for the English Government on children's services markets makes no reference to children's rights, children's participation or children's perspectives.

But there is an even more central problem of the market model, at least for ECEC and similar human services. Many people are reluctant to adopt the mantle of 'consumer' and are, indeed, ambivalent about the model and its premises. In a study of English public services, part of the joint Economic and Social Research Council and Arts and Humanities Research Council *Cultures of Consumption* programme, John Clarke found most people reject the trend towards treating everyone as 'consumers', seeing public services as different from the market-place and valuing their 'publicness':

"The idea that people expect to be treated as consumers by public services has become a central theme in public service reform under New Labour [i.e. the post-1997 UK Government]. ... [Our research] found that people have many relationships with public services. They are citizens, experts, taxpayers and voters as well as users, and they see themselves as part of wider bodies – as members of the public or local communities. When people approach health, police or social agencies, they do not always know what they want. They hope to meet staff who will respect them and help them make important decisions. ... Our findings show that *both providers and users consistently view public services as different from commercial transactions, insisting that the process is 'not like shopping'*. ... This phrase was used repeatedly in the interviews. It captures the view of the people we met that public services are, and should be, centred on ongoing,

personal relationships, rather than being anonymous, one-off transactions.”

(Clarke 2006; emphasis added)

Elsewhere, Clarke argues that “the key to unlocking public service improvement may lie in a deepening understanding of the relationship between service and user, rather than the blunt instrument of choice” (Clarke, quoted in Coleman 2006: 30).

Further evidence that using human services is not necessarily to be equated with shopping comes from the ECEC field. Consumers may switch between suppliers of mortgages or of privatised utilities such as electricity or gas. But when it comes to ‘childcare’, parents prove more reluctant to switch their custom.

“According to recent research, over half of [Dutch] parents had never considered changing to another provider. Only 5 percent actually did so in 2004. Childcare is not like a supermarket product: the relationship between consumer and provider is personal and long term. A double loyalty exists: to the childcare organisation, but also – and mainly – to their children. The longer childcare is used, the more familiar and safe parents and children feel and the more personal contact they have with staff and the other children and parents. In these circumstances, a price increase or a (small) change in opening hours will not generate much change in demand.”

(Marangos and Plantenga 2006: 19)

Not only may there be resistance to adopting the identity of consumer and the vision of the market, but there remains attachment to non-market values, such as loyalty, security and affective relationships.

That childcare markets do not work as markets are meant to because parents do not subscribe to the necessary roles and rules is also the conclusion of a study of middle-class parents in two areas of London, the most substantial research to date on the actual workings of childcare markets. Ball and Vincent (2006) describe the ‘childcare’ market as it actually functions as a ‘peculiar market’, for seven reasons. Given the uniqueness of this study, it is worth considering these reasons at greater length:

1. “The childcare market just does not work like markets are supposed to. As a practical market it is very different from a market in theory – and indeed it is a very inefficient market” (p. 38).
2. “The services which are required by consumers are complex and unusual. As our respondents unanimously see it, they want ‘safety, happiness and love’. ... This is in a sense an impossible market. The financial exchange is inadequate as a way of representing the relationship involved” (p. 38).
3. The market is “saturated with emotions”. “[Our data] are infused with the language of emotions” and “both positive choices and rejections are based on a mix of rational and emotional criteria ... and typically

determined by what is described as ‘gut instinct’” (pp. 38–40).

4. “There is little evidence of consumer sovereignty in these local London markets, partly because of shortages on the supply side, and partly because the consumer is in a position of relative ignorance” (p. 40).
5. “This is a highly gendered market. The main players in both supply and demand are women ... most literature on marketisation is silent on gender and also on the role of emotions. Again this challenges the traditional economic assumptions about the theoretical consumer. As Kenway and Epstein (1996: 307) suggest, ‘the free standing and hyper-rational, unencumbered competitive individual who can operate in the morally superior market can only be an image of middle-class maleness’” (p. 43).
6. “This is currently a highly segmented and diverse market, with very many different types of providers, both public and private. ... [T]he providers are clearly aware of themselves operating in a hierarchical, classed market ... [which] also has a very highly developed ‘grey market’ sector – with many informal, unregistered, ‘cash-in-hand’ operators” (Ball and Vincent 2006: 44).
7. “Parts of [this market] position parents as employers of individual service providers – nannies specifically – to work in their own homes. Again the relations of exchange are very complex, involving both personal/emotional and formal/financial aspects” (p. 47).

Although this work points to a variety of problems with the market model in practice,

including supply-side shortages and fragmentation, the heart of the matter is ambivalent or hostile attitudes to market rationality and its associated values and understandings. Nor is this confined to parents. Two studies, which together involved over 200 English ECEC practitioners, found that “the New Labour Government and its new managerialist emphasis on competitive individualism ... ran counter to the views and experiences of participants in both studies” (Osgood 2004: 10). Practitioners emphasised caring, collaboration and community, values that were perceived to be at odds with, and at risk from, reforms that emphasised competitive entrepreneurialism and favoured rationality, commercialism and measurability. Like Ball and Vincent, Osgood identified gender as an important influence:

“[T]he ethic of care and approaches to management that female managers tend to adopt can be regarded as oppositional discourses to the masculine managerialism ... embedded in government policy designed to promote entrepreneurialism. ... They were resistant to viewing children as financial commodities, but this became inevitable when seeking to make a profit.”

(Osgood 2004: 13, 16)

Ball and Vincent argue further that the current problems are irresolvable “in so far as there are important paradigmatic differences between the nature of market relations and the nature of the social relations embedded in childcare. ... [T]he market is an exchange relationship rather than a shared relationship based on

shared values” (Ball and Vincent 2006: 48). Actual behaviour in childcare markets throws into question the market’s understanding of the subject as *Homo economicus*, an understanding further questioned by the research of Duncan and his colleagues into how people make decisions about parenting, partnering and work:

“People seem to take such decisions *with reference to moral and socially negotiated views about what behaviour is expected as right and proper*, and that this negotiation, and the views that result, var[y] between particular social groups, neighbourhoods and welfare states. These decisions are not simply individual, but are negotiated in a collective way. ... *Decisions are still made rationally, but with a different sort of rationality to that assumed by the conventional economic and legal model.* ... If people do not act according to the model of rational economic man and the rational legal subject, then legislation based on such assumptions might well be ineffectual. This is what I have labelled the ‘rationality mistake’.”

(Duncan 2000: 1–2; emphasis added)

The word ‘legislation’ might easily be substituted by ‘policy’ or ‘delivery model’ here.

Similar critiques have been offered of the marketisation of other human services. Writing from a feminist perspective and basing her critique on

an ethics of care (Tronto 1993), Virginia Held seeks to define limits for markets.

“Areas such as healthcare, childcare, education, the informing of citizens, and the production of culture could all be thought of as domains in which values other than economic gain [the ideal market norm] should be accorded priority. ... [In these areas,] market norms limited only by rights should not prevail, even if the market is fair and efficient, because *markets are unable to express and promote many values important to these practises, such as mutually shared caring concerns.*”

(Held 2002: 29, 31; emphasis added)

Creating perfect, or even good enough, conditions for a well-functioning ECEC market is obviously problematic and, almost certainly, yet to be achieved. Some of the problems seem more susceptible to improvement than others, with the central problem for the market model being the inability (or unwillingness) of parents and practitioners to assume the role of utility maximisers and to adopt the values required for effective market participation. There is also a certain contradiction in the current situation that market models offer parents choice – except the choice of not participating in markets<sup>8</sup>.

But the problems are not confined to getting markets to function well as markets. There is

<sup>8</sup> Another apparent contradiction is how neoliberalism combines professed values of choice and flexibility with a passion, in practice, for control and standardisation (Davies and Saltmarsh 2007), applying a formidable battery of technologies for strong regulation of services (Rose 1999).

also evidence, albeit patchy, that market systems are not yet able to deliver the results sought by government policies, in particular equal access to good quality services and sustainability of services. Whether this is a temporary setback due to short-term imperfections in the market or these are endemic problems in the market model is a matter of opinion.

I have already noted that supply of services may not be evenly spread, one of the reasons for problems of access reported in some studies in England. Ball and Vincent conclude that the childcare market does not “guarantee quality or efficiency and it dispenses services in a highly inequitable fashion” (2006: 48)<sup>9</sup>. One group not so well served by market models may be middle-income families. I have also noted the report on the English childcare market, which suggests “working families unable to afford the full cost childcare places” may be “underserved” (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2006b, p. 7). Another English study, of several local areas, reported that in an affluent commuter area parents with higher incomes could keep prices high, thereby putting these services out of the reach of low- to middle-income parents (Harries et al. 2004).

Other English studies suggest that access problems are also likely to affect children of disadvantaged parents, including black and minority ethnic parents (Kazimirski et al. 2006a, b). This may also be what the PricewaterhouseCoopers report into childcare markets means

when it concludes, somewhat opaquely, that “the capacity developed may not suit the nature of local demand, e.g. in areas where cultural factors impact demand for childcare” (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2006b, p. 7). On the same theme, the major cross-national OECD thematic review of ECEC policies, covering 20 countries, notes that the “reluctance of market providers to invest in poor neighbourhoods incurs the risk of inequity towards low-income families” (OECD 2006: p. 117). This problem may be ameliorated through targeting extra resources either on low-income families or poor neighbourhoods. However, such targeted programmes:

“... miss not only a significant proportion of the children whom they are supposed to serve, but also the large group of moderate-income families who are unable to afford the programmes that are on offer in a market system. In addition, targeting is generally inaccurate – that is, it does not respond to children who move in and out of risk.”

(OECD 2006: 117)

A Dutch study of the impact of the 2005 Childcare Act concludes that since the introduction of more market forces, “provision of childcare in 2006 has shifted towards areas with higher purchasing power and away from less-urbanised areas” (Noailly et al. 2007: 18). The authors acknowledge that this might support concerns that the new legislation could lead to providers focusing on high income and more urban mar-

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<sup>9</sup> In an earlier book on the ‘educational market’, Ball (2003) has described similar inequalities in schooling, with middle-class families having strategic advantages when it comes to competing in marketised systems.



kets, though they conclude that it is too soon to say if this is in fact the case.

Another concern is quality. Without some form of public subsidy, quality may be variable, depending to a significant degree on the ability of parents to pay sufficient fees. But it may remain a problem even with some element of public funding, especially if demand-side funding (i.e. direct to parents) is used as the method most compatible with marketisation. The OECD Starting Strong review is generally critical of this funding method, on grounds that it fails to direct sufficient funding to support quality due especially to under-funding and inefficient use of funding. Its conclusion is clear:

“The evidence suggests that direct public funding of services brings more effective governmental steering of early childhood services, advantages of scale, *better national quality*, more effective training for educators and a higher degree of equity in access compared with parent subsidy models.”

(OECD 2006: 14; emphasis added)

Similar issues about quality in marketised ECEC services with a demand-side funding base are highlighted in national studies. Access to services in the Netherlands appears easier than in the UK; a study there found most parents have several choices available, though nearly a third of parents with children under four years old had no choice and the choice was more restricted in rural than urban areas (Marangos and Plantenga 2006). There are, however, concerns about the impact on qual-

ity of recent moves towards a lightly regulated market; standards appear to have been falling even before the new childcare legislation was introduced in 2005 (Vermeer et al. 2005).

The English childcare strategy document expresses concerns about quality in the existing market, which it blames (indirectly) on parents and (directly) on failings in the market:

“Analysis of the operation of the UK childcare market demonstrates that parents may undervalue quality, and trade it off against price. Findings from an Institute of Fiscal Studies analysis of the UK childcare market suggests that price is negatively related to quality, so that parents effectively compromise on quality as childcare becomes more expensive [Duncan, Paull and Taylor 2001]. These studies would suggest that the childcare market is not working to drive down price and drive up quality. This may indicate that parents do not have sufficient information to be able to form a full judgement of the quality of care on offer.”

(HM Treasury 2004: 67)

This conclusion seems to suggest that if only parents knew how to behave as consumers, then they would extract better quality for less cost. Yet it is not immediately obvious how price can be driven down and quality driven up. There is much evidence to show that the workforce is the central determinant of quality, and that a well-qualified and properly paid workforce is important: “Research from many countries supports the view that quality in the



early childhood field requires adequate training and fair working conditions for staff” (OECD 2006: 158). The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education study, a major longitudinal study of 3000 English children, provides a clear example of this recurring finding, concluding unequivocally that “settings which have staff with higher qualifications, especially with a good proportion of trained teachers on the staff, show higher quality and their children make more progress” (Sylva et al. 2003: 2).

But as labour is the major cost for providers, there are already pressures in competitive markets to keep labour costs low, which in turn have an adverse effect on levels of qualification. Wages in the ‘childcare’ sector in England are low; averaged over the period 2001–2005, the average hourly pay for nursery workers was £ 5.95 (€ 8.03), compared to £ 14.41 (€ 19.45) for primary school teachers and £ 8.53 (€ 11.51) for all women workers (Simon et al. 2008). So low indeed are wages that a rise in the national minimum wage (NMW) can cause concern to proprietors:

“Six out of ten respondents to the *Nursery World* [a UK practitioner magazine] 2006 pay survey said they had been significantly affected by the previous autumn’s NMW increase. ... Employers funded the increase, and consequential rises in rates for higher-qualified staff, by raising fees (although some said this resulted in parents leaving) and by a combination of cutting staffing levels, running at minimum ratios, reducing staff ratios, reducing staff hours and

employing younger, less well-qualified staff. The indirect effects of the NMW increase, said respondents, were a fall in staff morale, less interest in training, as staff perceive that the pay differentials do not justify the extra effort, and less money available for buying equipment.”

(Evans 2007: 10).

The majority of manager respondents in Osgood’s study “described their inability to pay staff more than the minimum wage” (2004: 16). Morgan (2005), comparing the USA, France and Sweden, found poor pay and conditions were more entrenched where market forces were stronger.

The existing squeeze on workers’ pay in market systems seems to be compounded by means-tested demand-side funding that is intended to enable lower-income families to participate. Such funding generally proves inadequate to ensure a well-educated and well-paid workforce. As the final report of the OECD review of ECEC comments, “demand-side funding is, in general, under-funding and the burden of costs in market-led systems falls essentially on parents, who, in the market economies pay fees ranging from 35 percent to 100 percent of the costs of childcare, unless they belong to low-income groups” (OECD 2006: 116). Inadequate to begin with, parent subsidies may not be passed on fully to providers and they make it difficult for services to plan for the longer term. Of course, supply-side funding is no guarantee of good employment conditions

and demand-side funding might be designed to achieve better results. However, demand-side funding tends to be associated with a view that ‘childcare’ services are essentially a private responsibility and cost (arising from the commodification of formerly private household work), with public funding consigned to the role of providing limited support for low-income families; such an understanding is not conducive to funding that is sufficient to support a well-qualified and well-paid workforce and to provide well-developed pedagogical and professional supports.

In sum, supporters of the market model argue that a well-functioning market will enable more parents to get better quality services through competition driving price down and quality up. The reality is that (a) quality is associated with the pay and qualification levels of the workforce, and (b) workforce pay accounts for most of the costs of ‘childcare’. Driving down price through pressure on salaries or staffing ratios is more likely to lower quality, all the more so as the workforce in most market systems already experience low pay and are (compared, for example, to teachers) poorly qualified.

Two other problems can be identified in markets, as they currently operate. First, the imperative of competition can override the benefits of collaboration. Thus the private sector managers in Osgood’s studies “tended to take an insular and defensive view of their interests and were sceptical about sharing practices for fear of losing a competitive edge over other providers” (Osgood 2004: 16). Consequently, most did not

participate in local networks and other groupings: one manager commented that “you’re all in competition with each other, so sitting on these things would be like liaising with the competition” (Osgood 2004: 16). The same tension between competition and collaboration is vividly displayed in this excerpt from an article by the chairman of a business that runs a chain of some 20 nurseries in England; responding to a government proposal that ‘best nurseries’ be expected to share ‘best practice’ with other nurseries, he points out the contradiction of such collaboration in a market system made up of nursery businesses:

“Imagine arriving at your supermarket and finding members of a rival brand advising on how best they should display their goods. ... What has this to do with childcare? Well, this is exactly what the government is expecting the best nurseries to do in an effort to raise standards across the board. In the spirit of partnership working, both the private and maintained [public] sectors will be expected to spend time sharing best practice[s] with other nurseries, even if they are competitors. ... [To] ignore the commerciality [sic] of such a request to the private sector is simply not realistic. ... Why should funds not be available to private companies that choose to offer ‘consultancy advice’? I would be willing to set up such a training support group within our company – but please, let such a scheme be both realistic and commercial.”

(Bentley 2008: 12)

Second, there is some evidence of considerable instability among services in markets; a lot of services prove unsustainable and close. The evaluation of the English Neighbourhood Nursery initiative concluded that without substantial subsidy, nurseries in disadvantaged neighbourhoods were not financially sustainable (Smith et al. 2007). But the problem is more general. Between 1999 and 2003 in England, the rate of childcare places closing was higher than government had expected: 626,000 new childcare places were created, mostly in ‘out-of-school’ services, but 301,000 closed, with the closure rate particularly high among family day carers, where it exceeded new places (National Audit Office [UK] 2004). The private sector remains vulnerable in England; at the start of 2007, the average vacancy rate was 22.5 percent, a doubling of the rate five years before, confirming that growth in nursery capacity has not been fully met by higher demand (Blackburn 2007). Most recently, it has been reported that in England the number of providers is plummeting (Gaunt 2009).

Similar experiences, of high closure rates among private services, are reported in other countries. Between 2000 and 2006, according to the annual reports of the Kind & Gezin, 749 new privately funded services opened in Flanders, but 338 closed; in other words, for every two start-ups there was one closure. Prentice (2005) quotes research in Canada (British Columbia) showing that a third of centres operating in 1997 had closed by 2001, with FP services at much greater risk. In 2003–2004, in

the province of Ontario, 349 centres opened, but 256 closed during the same year.

Finally, there is not much evidence of innovation in ‘childcare’ services in market systems, and what exists is limited to private centres offering specific programmes of instruction (e.g. English, information technology, music lessons) and ‘flexible places’, where children can attend for a few hours or sessions or even outside normal opening hours (OECD 2006). The emphasis here is on innovation as a response to individual consumer demands, in order to attract more business. By contrast, the examples cited later of experimentation in ECEC are all drawn from the public and non-profit private sector, and have evolved in non-market settings or else adopted a non-competitive approach. This does not prove that no such examples exist among FP services actively competing in markets; it does suggest that the alleged innovative nature of markets is not readily apparent in the ECEC sector, except in a very narrowly consumerist form.

### **Compulsory schooling: Another experience of the market model**

ECEC is not the only field where the market model has taken hold. It has assumed a larger role in the field of compulsory (and post-compulsory) education, with “advocates of choice and competition (continuing) to exercise a marked influence on education governance reform debates in the developed world and – increasingly – the developing world” (UNESCO

2008: 163). There is, of course, no simple equivalence between the two fields. Compulsory education has been a universal and publicly funded service for many years, at least in rich countries, with an extensive network of services and a well-established professionalised body of educators. However, the results of marketisation here may hold some clues of wider relevance, confirming issues already apparent in ECEC or hinting at issues meriting closer attention.

A recently published report from UNESCO, the seventh edition of the Education For All (EFA) global monitoring report (UNESCO 2008), contains an overview of evidence on the consequences of increasing individual parental choice and intra-school competition in school systems. The report summarises the attraction of choice and competition, and the underlying rationality for pursuing these market policies:

“In standard economic theory, choice and competition are two of the most powerful drivers of efficiency, with the spur of the market acting to raise productivity and enhance welfare. Few people see education provision as directly comparable with the production of market goods and services. But competition and its corollary, choice, are increasingly seen as antidotes for the failings of public education systems in relation to learning standards and equity gaps.”

(UNESCO 2008: 159)

The report goes on to note that governments, who remain ultimately responsible for school

systems, “play a key role in defining the parameters of choice”, for example through systems of funding (e.g. supporting private providers directly or indirectly via subsidies to parents) or handing over public provision to private organisations.

What has emerged from 20 years or more of policy activity? Overall, UNESCO is wary of generalisations: “Experiences and outcomes have varied ... context is important” (p. 159). However, the results provide no clear-cut endorsement for marketisation: “The idea that increased parental choice leads to improved learning outcomes has intuitive appeal but is not well supported by evidence” (p. 160). For example, analysis by OECD of results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study of 15-year-olds in over 50 countries concludes that “whether students are in competitive schools or not does not matter for their performance when socio-economic factors are accounted for” (OECD 2007: 236); while in the United States, “advantages to academic outcomes stemming from voucher programmes are at most notably modest, and also certainly do not rise to the level anticipated by the early optimistic assumptions” (Lubienski 2008).

If the results of choice and competition for improved efficiency seem thin, what about the other argument deployed for them: closing the equity gap? Here, UNESCO pointedly observes, “The fact that competition by its nature creates losers as well as winners is sometimes forgotten” (p. 161). Indeed, “school choice can exacerbate

inequalities in many ways". In particular, for a variety of reasons, disadvantaged children end up often concentrated in the worst-performing schools, while more advantaged families are best able to work the system: "Research in the United States shows that parents with wider social networks and more access to information are more likely to take advantage of choice policies and that they are better able to ensure that their children enter the higher quality schools they select" (p. 162). Put another way, middle-class parents are more likely to thrive in a system of choice and competition, able to deploy greater resources of knowledge, skills and contacts than less advantaged groups (Ball et al. 1994; Whitty et al. 1998; Ball 2003). As Ball observes, "internationally, school choice policies are taken advantage of and primarily work in the interests of middle-class families" (Ball 2003: 37).

UNESCO's conclusion is downbeat. Choice and competition between providers "may have the potential to play a role in improving education quality, (but so far) there is little evidence of that potential being realised on a significant scale" (p. 170).

One possible consequence of marketisation not considered by the UNESCO report is that, over time, it may in fact change the subjectivity of participants. That rather than resisting, parents actually assume the role of *Homo economicus*, economically rational actors, calculating, competitive and autonomous consumers, struggling to make the best choice for their child, with no account for other 'consumers', the fair distribu-

tion of collective resources (Biesta and Lawy 2006) or the wider public good. A study soon after the major reforms in English education policy were ushered in by the 1988 Education Act noted that "parents of children in primary schools in England increasingly began to identify themselves as consumers during the course of the study" (Hughes et al. 1994). However, it should be recalled from the earlier discussion that it is one thing to think of yourself as a consumer, another to act as *Homo economicus*.

If this changed subjectivity is occurring in compulsory education, will the same occur with ECEC as new generations are conditioned to the market model? And if so, how should we view such (actual or potential) changes? As a positive adaptation to an efficient economic system? Or as the 'corrosion of character' that Sennett (1998) sees as the consequence of free market capitalism? The answer, like the question, is political and ethical.

The rationale of the market model is that of a calculating consumer, pursuing private benefit through choice between competitive businesses that jockey for advantage in a market place.

What this rationale confronts and threatens to erode is "any conception of the public good as collective good determined through democratic participation, contestation, and judgement in the public sphere" (Ransom 2003: 470). I turn now to consider an alternative model for the delivery and practice of ECEC, one that foregrounds public good, democratic participation and contestation.



## Chapter 2: The model of democratic experimentalism

“Democracy needs to be reborn in each generation, and education is its midwife.”

(John Dewey)

“Our society faces challenges where we need to act collaboratively more than ever. We need to deepen democracy through more deliberative and participative democratic mechanisms that spread democracy into the ‘everyday’ of our lives. And we need to foster a stronger public realm and associative democracy with organisations that bring people together to live and learn together.”

(Shah and Goss 2007: 26)

### Changing direction: The model of democratic experimentalism

It is time now to introduce *an* other (not *the* other) model for the provision of ECEC services, which I have termed ‘democratic experimentalism’. To re-iterate the introduction, I do not claim that this model is the only alternative to the market model. Nor do I claim that it does the same as the market model, only better. Each model, therefore, has its own logic or rationality that determines what is necessary and desirable, what makes sense and what should be strived for. Like all models, in the real world neither model is likely to be found in a pure form, nor to function perfectly; we are more likely to find approximations than perfect replicas.

What do the two terms ‘democratic’ and ‘experimentalism’ mean? And why do they belong together? Proponents of the market model may argue for the market as a perfect form of democracy, enabling each person to express their preferences and make their choices, co-ordinated by the invisible hand of the market, a consumer-driven and highly individualistic form that Apple (2005) describes as ‘thin’. I adopt a ‘thick’ form that sees democracy as assuming collective forms and concerns; certainly it involves people pursuing their own interests but also with some capacity and opportunity to deliberate upon, judge and decide upon the common good. In short, I opt here for a political rather than an economic concept of democracy.

I also opt for understanding democracy as a complex and multi-layered concept. It involves certain formal institutions and procedures: elected governments, legislatures and management committees, for example. But there is much more to it; democracy can pervade and shape every facet of being, relationship and behaviour. In the words of John Dewey, described by Carr and Hartnett as “the most influential educational philosopher of the 20th century” (1996: 54), democracy is “primarily a mode of associated living embedded in the culture and social relationships of everyday life”; it is “a personal way of individual life: ... it signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character

and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life” (Dewey 1939: 2). Discussing the concept of listening, but equally applicable to the broader concept of democracy, Rinaldi pursues the same theme: “Listening is not only a technique and a didactic methodology, but a way of thinking and seeing ourselves in relationship with others and the world” (quoted in Moss et al. 2005: 6). While Langsted speaks of a ‘cultural climate’ that fosters listening and involvement of children and which will “then lead to structures and procedures that can guarantee the involvement of children” (Langsted 1994: 42).

Understood in this sense, democracy is far more than a system of government; it is not just a political matter or simply the practice of majority rule. It is a moral ideal and way of life, both personal and collective, that needs constant attention and practice. It is about the inclusion and influence of everyone, minorities as well as majorities; it is about ineradicable difference and disagreement, but it is also about negotiating on the basis of shared adherence to certain principles. As such, it values certain attitudes, qualities and behaviours, whether in major decisions of state or in the everyday life of the family, nursery or school: plurality, respect for difference, dialogue, listening, deliberation, shared enquiry, critical judgement, co-operation, collective decision-making, individual freedom, the common good, participation. It also requires faith in humanity: “Democracy is a way of personal life controlled not merely by faith in human nature in general but by faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent

judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished” (Dewey 1939: 2). Unger echoes this view, arguing that an essential doctrine of democracy is “faith in the constructive powers of ordinary men and women” (Unger 2005b: 67).

It is important to emphasise that there is no choice to be made between democracy as a form of political organisation and democracy as a way of life: they are both needed and interdependent. Again Dewey makes the point strongly:

“Unless democratic habits of thought and action are part of the fibre of a people, political democracy is insecure. It cannot stand in isolation. It must be buttressed by the presence of democratic methods in all social relationships.”

(Dewey 1937: 467)

Democratic methods in social relationships apply to “all modes of human association”, including the family, the school and the nursery. Democracy of government requires democracy in the nursery (and school), and vice versa; and while putting in place certain democratic structures and procedures is important, so too is furnishing conditions that foster certain values and understandings that nourish certain ways of everyday living and relating.

Experimentation is about bringing something new to life, whether that something is a thought, knowledge, a service or a tangible product. It expresses a willingness, a desire in fact, to invent, to think differently, to imagine



and try out different ways of doing things. It is driven by the desire to go beyond what already exists, to venture into the not yet known, not to be bound by the given, the familiar, the pre-determined, the norm: “Experimentation is always that which is in the process of coming about – the new, remarkable, and interesting that replace the appearance of truth and are more demanding than it is” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 111).

Like democracy, experimentation can have its more formal side, involving instituting new projects in a service or community; but it also represents a way of living and relating that is open-ended (avoiding closure), open-minded (welcoming the unexpected) and open-hearted (valuing difference). It can be a new take on an old subject, bringing to bear new perspectives and methods; or responding to a new subject, one that has emerged because of changing conditions or new understandings. Without experimentation, we are locked into an endless round of reproducing, in which the same prescribed means pursue the same known ends, in a repetitive and sterile process that gradually decays from the tedium of repetition.

Experimentation, of course, is not solely or necessarily connected to democracy. It can be associated with a certain scientific method, where parameters and conditions are controlled and outcomes are expected.

It is often linked to markets “that allow for experimentation by many economic decision-makers who can expect rich rewards for success”

(Hutton and Schneider 2008: 8). Markets, it is argued, are dynamic in seeking out and applying new technologies and new products, to increase efficiency and to respond to consumer demand. So they are, but they are neither sufficient nor infallible; innovation requires certain conditions and markets often fail. Equally important, markets provide no means for experimentation that enables public deliberation on what is important, expresses the collective will on where to innovate, creates “innovation-friendly co-operative practices” (Unger 2005a: 52) or shares equitably the benefits of innovation. That needs what Unger terms ‘democratic experimentalism’:

“The provision of public services must be an innovative collective practice, moving forward the qualitative provision of the services themselves. That can no longer happen in our current understanding of efficiency and production by the mechanical transmission of innovation from the top. It can only happen through the organisation of a collective experimental practice from below. ... Democracy is not just one more terrain for the institutional innovation that I advocate. It is the most important terrain.”

(Unger 2005b: 179, 182)

For Unger, experimentation is an essential element of what he terms ‘high energy democracy’, which should include “vastly expanded opportunities to try out, in particular parts of the country or sectors of the economy, different ways of doing things” (Unger 2005b: 78).

In his study of innovative schools serving disadvantaged communities, Leadbeater draws a somewhat similar connection, in this case between innovation and collaboration (collaboration might be considered a quality needed for democracy, but not as synonymous):

“Lasting public innovations are invariably deeply collaborative undertakings, which succeed only with the mobilisation and collaboration of many different participants. In the case of changes to education, these players involve at least pupils and parents, teachers and governments, politicians and policy-makers, both national and local, as well as related public agencies, employers and the community around a school. Public innovation is more like mobilising a social movement ... around which a variety of competing and collaborating companies can work. That process of open, collaborative innovation, is impossible unless the people involved share common goals and frames of reference.”

(Leadbeater 2008: 14)

Just as the market model is inscribed with distinctive values, understandings, concepts and particular goals, so too the model of democratic experimentalism has distinctive qualities. The market model is based on a relationship of trade or exchange between two individuals, a consumer and a seller; the model of democratic experimentalism on relationships of dialogue and creativity between citizens. The market model posits a utility-maximising *Homo economicus*, focused on individual (including

family) needs and benefits and freed “from what are construed as the burdensome chains of social justice and social responsibility” (Davies and Saltmarsh 2007: 3). This active and autonomous risk-managing subject is engaged in a calculative and contractual relationship with a commodity-providing and self-interested provider, kept up to the mark by the discipline of competition; without such competition, resources will be wasted and provision will be unresponsive. This subject is also an adult, the child being treated as an object for whom care or education is needed and on whom outcomes are wrought. ECEC is depoliticised, being “displaced to the private realm – becoming matters for domestic deliberation or consumer choice” (Hay 2007: 85) (although the degree of displacement will vary depending how far government regulates the market).

The model of democratic experimentalism, by contrast, presumes a subject who is capable and willing to adopt a public as well as a private role, with a sense of social justice and responsibility, and who is a citizen concerned with collective as well as individual well-being, bearing both rights and responsibilities. This subject can be child or adult, children being viewed as agents and rights-bearing citizens in the here and now, whose views and experiences need full expression in the processes of democratic participation that are central to this model. Central values of this model are participation, dialogue, trust – and choice.

It is important to make clear at this point that the use of the word ‘choice’, in the context of

this model, refers to the democratic process of collective choice or decision-making, not the *individual* choice of the market model: ‘choice’ is thus a value in both models, but understood in very different ways. As a recent report into Britain’s democracy puts it:

“We do not believe that the consumer and the citizen are one and the same, as the new market-driven technocracy seems to assume. Consumers act as individuals, making decisions largely on how an issue will affect themselves and their families. Citizenship implies membership of a collective where decisions are taken not just in the interest of the individual but for the collective as a whole or for a significant part of that collective.”

(Power Inquiry 2006: 169)

Bentley blames a shift from collective to individual choice-making for the contemporary crisis of democracy:

“Liberal democracy combined with market capitalism has reinforced the tendency of individuals to act in ways that reduce our ability to make collective choices. This is the underlying reason for the crisis in democracy. ... Not enough people see democratic politics as part of their own personal identity to sustain the cultures and institutions through which political legitimacy is created. The result is that our preoccupation with making individual choices is undermining our ability to make collective choices. Our democracy is suffocating itself.”

(Bentley 2005: 9, 19)

Carr and Hartnett, in the excerpt from their book *Education and the Struggle for Democracy* that starts this paper, draw a similar distinction. In a democracy, they argue, individuals do not only express personal preferences, pursuing narrow self-interests in a competitive marketplace. They also “make public and collective choices related to the common good of their society” (Carr and Hartnett 1996: 192).

These different understandings of choice are central to the two models. Individual choice, as prioritised by the market model, addresses diversity through differentiation of individuals and services and exclusive attentiveness to private interests; individuals seek services that best cater to their preferences, perspectives and means, the key question being, ‘what is best for me/my child/my family?’ The market model’s goal is ‘freedom of choice’, meaning freedom from any consideration of the common good or shared responsibility: the views, prejudices and preferences of the autonomous consumer go unquestioned, since the market exists solely to cater to them.

Collective choice, as prioritised in democratic experimentalism, addresses diversity through the engagement of individuals in democratic relationships and actions; individuals encounter each other in a common service, be it a common nursery or school. But a common nursery or school should not be confused with a standardised or standardising nursery or school; it does not deny difference or assume everyone is the same, indeed it is based on deep respect for alterity and the absolute singularity

of the individual. It assumes that the democratic process involves processes of constructing – to a greater or lesser degree – shared interests, values, identities and purposes; that this process involves recognition of otherness and plurality, contestation and agonistic relationships; that new thought and knowledge, as opposed to reproduction and transmission of existing thought and knowledge, requires encounters with others; that such thought and knowledge is a key part of the common good that nurseries and schools can produce; and that education involves individual learning through social relationships, just as autonomy (the ability to construct our own meanings and make our own decisions) requires interdependence. Last but not least, collective choice involves having to weigh up personal interests with the common good, to arrive at a position that gives recognition to both. Rather than ‘freedom of choice’ as an aim of policy, as in the market model, we might speak of ‘responsibility of choice’ as an aim of democratic experimentalism, involving the responsibility of having to make a choice that surpasses the purely individual.

As well as different understandings of the subject – adult and child – the two models have different understandings of ECEC services themselves. In democratic experimentalism,

an ECEC service is not a provider of a private commodity to a customer. It is in the public realm: as such it is a public space, a public good and a public responsibility<sup>10</sup>, an expression of a community taking collective responsibility for the education and upbringing of its young children. Services feel a responsibility for and wish to be open to all local families, not just to those wanting and able to pay for a commodity; and because of their commitment to participation, these services want to be both inclusive and responsive to the needs of all local families<sup>11</sup>.

Spaces in the public realm, in particular ECEC services and schools, are understood in democratic experimentalism as being of the utmost importance for the health of society. All citizens attend them as of right; they are, therefore, vital to the creation of social cohesion and solidarity. They protect and encourage social values of sharing, mutuality, collaboration – and democracy: “Our children learn to constrain and contextualise the values learned in capitalism – greed and instant gratification. ... We satisfy a basic human need for expression as part of a group, a collective” (Shah and Goss 2007: 73).

Adopting democratic experimentalism as a model for ECEC, with an understanding of these services as being in the public realm, involves

<sup>10</sup> Fielding (2001) distinguishes ‘responsibility’ from ‘accountability’. ‘Accountability’ is predominantly contractual and legal, “a largely negative instrument of social and political control” (p. 699). ‘Responsibility’, the term I use here, is primarily a moral concept, and “elicits and requires a felt and binding mutuality...[it] tends to be a largely positive, morally resonant means of encouraging mutually supportive endeavour to which both, or all parties feel reciprocally and interdependently committed” (p. 700).

<sup>11</sup> Questioning a strict dichotomy between public and private domains, Vandenbroeck, Roets and Snoeck (2009) argue that ECEC services can be “fascinating sites to study issues of diversity and democracy” because they are places of “daily encounters (or confrontations for that matter) between the intimacy of family lives and the public domain ... places of continuous negotiations between private and public domains in which hybridisation of identity and multiple belongings are shaped”.

what Marquand describes as safeguarding the public domain “from incursions by the market domain of buying and selling”. The goods of this domain – whether care, health, education – “should not be treated as commodities or proxy commodities”, nor does the “language of buyer and seller, producer and consumer” belong here (Marquand 2000: 212–213).

As part of the public realm or domain, ECEC services (and schools) can further be understood as forums, or places of encounter, for citizens, young and old, in which many projects are possible – social, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, economic and political. Here are just a few of these projects, to give a hint of the potential of these social institutions, definitely not a complete inventory:

- construction of knowledge, values and identities;
- researching children’s learning processes;
- community and group support and empowerment;
- cultural (including linguistic) sustainability and renewal;
- promoting gender and other forms of equality;
- supporting economic development;
- democratic and ethical practice.

The last example includes the practice in ECEC services of democratic politics around a range of issues concerning children, families, education and the relationship of these issues to society, discussed in more detail below. These issues are brought into the public realm and politicised;

that is, they move from the private realm or the realm of technical expertise to become subject to public processes of deliberation, decision-making and human agency (Hay 2007); examples of political issues will be given below.

Rather than ‘delivering’ predetermined ‘outcomes’, the ECEC service in the model of democratic experimentalism is a potential, a place of possibilities; some of these are predetermined, but many others are not, proving unexpected and surprising, a source of wonder and amazement. Surprise, wonder and amazement are possible and valued when not subject to the tyranny of predetermined outcomes, but also because of the importance attached to ‘experimentalism’. This goes beyond innovation or responsiveness; it is far more than simply meeting existing or new consumer preferences or applying new technologies. It means services engaging with families – children and adults – in the creation or co-construction of new knowledge, new understandings and new desires, the outcomes of which cannot be predetermined or precisely predicted. Services become like workshops or laboratories, where new projects can be created and tried, produced from the encounter of different perspectives and identities; in this way, participatory democracy is a condition for experimentation.

The results of this experimentalism are what Hardt and Negri (2005) term “immaterial production”, which includes “the production of ideas, images, knowledge, communication, co-operation, and affective relations ... social life itself” (p. 146). Such immaterial production,

they argue, is based on co-operation, collaboration and communication – “in short, its foundation in the common” (p. 147). In the model, the immaterial products created by the experimentalism of ECEC services are not appropriated as private property, but made freely available for the common good.

The term ‘childcare’ is quite inadequate to describe the breadth and complexity of the services in this model; in the sense of providing a safe and secure environment for children while their parents work, ‘childcare’ is just one of the many possibilities that services can provide. While childcare is recognised to be important in societies where most parents are employed or studying, these services are not centred on this function and are not ‘childcare services’. Other terms might be used to talk about such services: ‘kindergartens’, ‘children’s centres’ and ‘schools’ (reclaiming this term for a service that practises education in its broadest sense) are just some of the possibilities.

### **Democratic experimentalism: What the model looks like**

In this section, I want to sketch out what a model of democratic experimentalism might mean for the provision of ECEC: how it might be implemented. As indicated in the preceding section, the model in its ideal form applies at and to several levels: from the national or fed-

eral, through the regional and the local, to the individual institution – the children’s centre, kindergarten or nursery<sup>12</sup>. It is possible to have an individual centre or an individual community working creatively – but in isolation – with democratic experimentalism. Ideally, though, all levels should be committed to the model, to form a mutually supportive system. In this case, national and local government value and support democracy in the nursery, but the nursery itself promotes and supports democracy in the wider society. For, as Dewey reflects:

“It is the main business of the family and the school to influence directly the formation and growth of attitudes and dispositions, emotional, intellectual and moral. Whether this educative process is carried on in a predominantly democratic or non-democratic way becomes, therefore, a question of transcendent importance not only for education itself but for its final effect upon all the interests and activities of a society that is committed to the democratic way of life.”

(Dewey 1937).

The discussion in this section, therefore, addresses all levels and their interdependency. The argument is that different levels have responsibility for different democratic choices and that each level, while adopting democratic practice in its own workings, should support democratic practice at other levels.

<sup>12</sup> This discussion omits another important level for many countries: the European Union. This unique international body has a long-standing and growing interest in ECEC services (e.g. the Barcelona Targets, setting common goals for levels of service provision, adopted by member states at the Barcelona summit in March 2002). An important issue that deserves more attention is the role of the EU in the development of ECEC policy and how that role might be democratically undertaken. For one perspective, see *Children in Europe*, 2008.

### National level

What is the democratic space at national or federal level? What democratic choices should be made there? Unger calls for “decisive choices in national policies and experimental deviations and dissents in particular parts” (Unger 2005b: 30). One of the most fundamental choices to be decided in national policy is which model of service provision to choose – for example, a market model or a model of democratic experimentalism.

Let us assume the choice has been made for a model of democratic experimentalism, a collective national choice made after democratic dialogue and deliberation. Then the next ‘decisive choice’ is to define a *national framework* of entitlements and standards that expresses democratically agreed national values, expectations and objectives; and assures the material conditions needed to make these entitlements and standards a reality, enabling other levels to play an active role in implementation. This framework should be clear and strong, without smothering all regional or local diversity, a difficult balancing act that needs to leave space for the practice of democracy at more local levels. To take some examples, it might mean:

- an entitlement to access ECEC services for children as citizens (in my view from at least 12 months of age), together with a funding system that enables all children to exercise their entitlement;
- a statement that early childhood services are a public good and responsibility, not a private commodity;

- a framework curriculum that defines broad values and goals but allows local interpretation and augmentation;
- a fully integrated early childhood policy, the responsibility of one government department;
- a well-educated and well-paid workforce for all young children (at least half of whom are graduates);
- active policies to reduce poverty and inequality.

To encourage and support democracy and experimentalism in local authorities and individual centres, national government can recognise both as explicit and important values for the whole system of early childhood education. Last but not least, national government can combine a coherent and comprehensive national framework – such as I have just outlined – with strong decentralisation, creating space for and guaranteeing local democratic decision-making and experimentation. This relationship, of national leadership and democratic decentralisation, is advocated in the final report of the OECD thematic review of early childhood policy, *Starting strong*:

“The *decentralisation of management functions* to local authorities is a gauge of participatory democracy. At the same time, the experience of ECEC policy reviews suggests that central governments have a pivotal role in creating *strong and equitable early childhood* systems and in co-constructing and ensuring programme standards. In sum, there is a strong case to be made for minis-



tries in charge to retain significant influence over both legislation and financing within a framework of partnership. Through these instruments, democratic governments can ensure that wider societal interests are reflected in early childhood systems, including social values such as democracy, human rights and enhanced access for children with special and additional learning needs. In this vision *the state can become the guarantor of democratic discussion and experimentation at local level*, instead of simply applying policies from the centre.”

(OECD 2006: 220: emphasis added).

In this role, national government not only positively supports democracy at all levels, it also positively supports Unger’s “experimental deviations and dissents” (Unger 2005b: 30). This implies a welfare state that guarantees social experimentation (Santos 1995) and enables ‘Utopian experimentation’ to be tried (Held 1995).

A final thought on the role of national government. In its report for the English government, titled *Children’s services markets*, PricewaterhouseCoopers suggests that the government should “articulate a vision for market provision” (2006a: 5). Government can assume a similar role if adopting the model of democratic experimentalism: it can ‘articulate a vision for democratic experimentalism’, a vision that is recognised to be provisional and contestable, but that is nevertheless an important reference point for others.

### ***Provincial, state or regional level***

I shall move now to more local levels of government. In so doing, I am conscious of skimming over a level of provincial, state or regional government that is important in many (mostly federal) countries, for example Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Spain and the United States. A full discussion of the model of democratic experimentalism in ECEC would need to take greater account of this level of government, located between national and local. However, coming, as I do, from one of the most centralised countries in Europe, I feel somewhat ill equipped to go in any depth into issues of federalism and regionalisation.

Some of the opportunities and dilemmas that arise in federal systems are discussed in the country note on Germany prepared as part of the OECD thematic review of early childhood. That identifies decentralisation and local autonomy – both at state (regional) and local levels – as a “strength of the German system” (OECD 2004: 44). But at the same time, the country note identifies two conditions as being needed if these features are to be a strength rather than a weakness: a practice of diversity that involves a rigorous and critical process of development and evaluation; and “certain common, national standards, in particular in those areas that concern equity between families, and the right of children to provision and quality”. But in reality, such standards in Germany – the national framework referred to in the previous section – are underdeveloped:



“Only access to kindergarten is covered by a national norm, taking the form of a limited entitlement to part-time kindergarten for children from 3 upwards. Otherwise there are large differences between *Länder* in levels of provision. Similarly, funding arrangements vary between *Länder*, including what parents are required to pay. In the long term, such diversity seems unacceptable and not in the interests either of children or families. ECEC services operate under different regulations and now with different education plans, albeit defined within a broad common frame. Where to draw the line between diversity and standardisation here is a difficult issue, but the review team find it difficult to understand why there should be such different expectations concerning access to non-kindergarten services or, in the kindergarten field, such different norms in basic structural matters as group size, staff–child ratios and in-service training.

(OECD 2004: 44–45)

The early years field needs to pay more attention to the situation of federal states, as well as to those states that, though not federal, devolve substantial powers over education to regional governments, such as the Autonomous Communities in Spain. The issues, it could be argued, are similar to those in other states, particularly those that practice strong local decentralisation: the relationship between central and local responsibilities, between coherence and diversity, between citizen rights and local perspectives. But another layer of government does, undoubtedly, increase com-

plexity and may introduce qualitatively different issues. Not least, does a regionalised system weaken the next level of government, the local level? It is to this level that I now move.

### ***Local authority level***

The model of democratic experimentalism involves each level supporting democratic practice at other levels, partly through creating space for such practice. This means strong decentralisation to the local level (OECD 2006; Power Inquiry 2006). What does democratic experimentalism involve at this level?

Some years ago, I visited an Italian city with a rich experience in early childhood education. The head of the services in this city – which is not, as it happens, Reggio Emilia – described their work over 30 years as a ‘local cultural project of childhood’. This description is echoed in the title of a book from the head of early childhood services in San Miniato, another Italian local authority: *The Education of Young Children as a Community Project* (Fortunati 2006). The idea of local authorities embarking on long-term and open-ended projects to explore possibilities for and with their young citizens captures what democratic experimentalism at its best and most active can mean and achieve in a local authority or commune or municipality. It captures that idea of political commitment, citizen participation and collective decision-making that may enable a community to take responsibility for its children and their education (in its broadest sense): responsibility not just for providing services but for how they are understood, for the purposes

they serve in that community and for the pedagogical practice that goes on within them.

Furthermore the term ‘project’ embodies a concept of experimentation as a desire to explore different perspectives, create new understandings and practices and to be open to new and unexpected possibilities; as such it connects work at the local authority and the nursery level. Here, Carlina Rinaldi (2005) explains why in Reggio Emilia they choose to use the term ‘project’ to describe learning processes in their ‘municipal schools’, but her comments could equally well apply to the broader cultural work of a local authority – what might be termed ‘municipal learning’ through experimentation:

“[Learning takes] many directions and often leads to unexpected places. It is a process of constructing, testing and reconstructing theories, which are our interpretive models of the world. This is a group process: each individual – child or adult – is nurtured by the hypotheses and theories of others, and by conflicts with others that force us constantly to revise our theories about reality.

We use the term ‘project’ to define this complex situation, involving constant dialogue between children and adults. ... The word ‘project’ evokes the idea of a dynamic process, a journey that involves the uncertainty and chance that always arises in relationship with others. Project work grows in many directions, with no predefined progression, no outcomes decided before the journey begins.”

(Rinaldi 2005: 19)

The local authority or commune working with democratic experimentalism creates a space for shared enquiry and dialogue from which a collective view of the child and her relationship to the community is produced and local policy, practice and knowledge develops. This in turn is always open to democratic (re)evaluation and new thinking. Such local projects may be actively encouraged by national levels of government (though in Italy, local projects have been the result of local governments and politicians with strong democratic traditions and commitments to education, who are willing and able to use space made available to them by a weak national government).

How local cultural projects of childhood can be actively encouraged, what other conditions they need to flourish and what structures and processes may sustain them – all these conditions are important subjects for further research. We perhaps need rather fewer studies of the effectiveness of this or that technical programme in producing predefined outcomes, and rather more studies on how and why certain communities (or individual centres) have managed to become local cultural projects, capable of developing an approach that is participatory, experimental and researching. Nor should we expect that these projects can be equally successful and innovative in all local areas. Some communities will be more creative, curious and democratic than others; though we should not underestimate the potential for creativity, curiosity and democracy that may exist in local areas or among individual citizens.

But even where local cultural projects of childhood fail to thrive, the local government level can still make an important contribution to democratic experimentalism. Local authorities interpret and augment the national framework, in areas such as curricula. They can affirm the importance of democracy as a value, and they can support democracy in the nursery. And they have an important role to play in the provision of ECEC services.

In the market model, the local authority manages the market to ensure adequate supply and strong competition: it plays no role as a provider, except perhaps very occasionally in the very last resort. In democratic experimentalism, the local authority nurtures the development of democratic social institutions provided by a range of ‘social agents’. It actively promotes: collaboration between them, fostering networks and shared projects; democratic practices within them; and experimentation, individually and collectively. But it also acts as a provider itself, not of all services, but of some, both to ensure it has direct experience of what it means to create democratic experimental services and to serve as a pacesetter for experimentalism (see the final section of this paper for Unger’s argument about an active provider role for government).

### *In the nursery*

Finally, I want to consider democratic experimentalism at its most local level, in the early childhood institution itself: the nursery, crèche, pre-school, kindergarten, nursery school or any

of the other terms we use to describe settings for collective early childhood education. The starting point needs to be how we imagine, construct or understand this institution: what do we think the nursery is? Two understandings permeate the market model: the early childhood institution as an enclosure or factory, where technology can be applied to produce predetermined outcomes; and the early childhood institution as business, selling a commodity to consumers.

But there are many other understandings, some of which are more productive of democratic experimentalist practice: in particular, as already outlined, the understanding of the early childhood institution as a public forum or meeting place in civil society or as a place of encounter and dialogue between citizens, from which many possibilities can emerge – some expected, others not – and which is most productive when relationships are governed by democratic practice. The early childhood institution in which democratic practice is foregrounded creates one of the new spaces that are needed if democracy is to be renewed: to use Bentley’s term, it can be a place for ‘everyday democracy’. In particular, it offers the possibility of democratic practice that is not representative (through electing representatives) but direct: the rule of all by all. This space offers opportunities for all citizens, younger and older, to participate – be they children or parents, practitioners or politicians, or indeed any other local citizen. Topics ignored or neglected in traditional politics can be made the subjects of democratic practice.

It is important to re-iterate an earlier distinction: between democracy as a principle of government and democracy as a form of living together. I do not want to set them into opposition; it is possible to imagine a nursery that had both very democratic structures (for example, management by elected representatives of parents and educators) and a strong democratic ethos that placed high value on listening, dialogue, deliberation and other qualities that make up democracy as a form of associated living. But the two need not go together; or they may overlap but by no means fully. Moreover, even with democratic structures of government involving full representation from all adults involved in a centre, it is unlikely that children would play an equal role in these decision-making structures – though they could have influence on decisions through a democratic ethos of listening and dialogue.

So democratic practice covers a large area of possibilities, and democracy in the nursery can take many forms, from the very formal to the very informal. It might, perhaps, be more useful to think of each nursery having a ‘democratic profile’, indicating in what areas, in what ways and with whom democracy was practiced. But without at all wishing to play down democracy as a matter of relationships, attitudes and values expressed in everyday life, I want here to consider four examples of rather more formal

democratic participation, which following Mouffe’s definitions (see Introduction) (Mouffe 2000), involve bringing politics and the political into the nursery:

1. *Decision-making* about the purposes, the practices and the environment of the nursery, addressing John Dewey’s principle that “all those who are affected by social institutions must have a share in producing and managing them” (Dewey 1937). This is closest to the idea of democracy as a principle of government, in which either representatives or all members of certain groups have some involvement in decisions in specified areas. Examples might be nurseries run as co-operatives by a staff or parent group or nurseries run by a community of some form. Another example would be the elected boards of parents that all early childhood centres in Denmark must have, which are involved in pedagogical, budgetary and staffing issues (Hansen 2002). How much power, in theory or practice, such bodies exercise may vary considerably.
2. *Evaluation* of pedagogical work through participatory methods. In the book *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care* (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 2007), the authors contrast a technical language of evaluation, ‘quality’, with a democratic language, ‘meaning making’<sup>13</sup>. The language

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<sup>13</sup> The concept of evaluative ‘languages’ was suggested by Reggio Children Publications, when they translated and published (in Italy) the book, *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care* (Dahlberg et al. 2007), changing the original English subtitle of ‘postmodern perspectives’ to *I linguaggi della valutazione – ‘languages of evaluation’*.

of ‘quality’ involves a supposedly objective observer applying externally determined norms to an institution, to make a decontextualised assessment of conformity to these norms. The language of ‘meaning making’, by contrast, speaks of evaluation as a democratic process of interpretation, a process that involves making practice visible and thus subject to reflection, dialogue and argumentation, leading to an assessment that is contextualised and provisional because it is always subject to contestation. ‘Quality’ offers a statement of fact, ‘meaning making’ a judgement of value. The two languages work with very different tools: ‘quality’ with checklists and similar standardised templates, and ‘meaning making’ with pedagogical documentation, which I explain below.

3. *Contesting dominant discourses*, confronting what Foucault terms regimes of truth, which seek to shape our subjectivities and practices through their universal truth claims and their relationship with power. This political activity seeks to make core assumptions and values visible and contestable. Yeatman (1994) refers to it as ‘post-modern politics’ and offers some examples: a *politics of epistemology*, contesting modernity’s idea of knowledge<sup>14</sup>; a *politics of representation*, about whose perspectives have legitimacy; and a *politics of differ-*

*ence*, which contests those groups claiming a privileged position of objectivity on a contested subject. But we could extend the areas opened up to politics that are re-politicised as legitimate subjects for inclusive political dialogue and contestation: the *politics of childhood*, about the image of the child, the good life and what we want for our children; the *politics of education*, about what education can and should be; and the *politics of gender*, in the nursery and the home. These and many other ideas can be the subject of democratic engagement within the early childhood institution, examples of bringing the political into the nursery. By so doing, we do not and cannot do away with power and exclusion, but we can make them visible and, therefore, contestable in a continuous process, which:

“... should not be cause for despair because the desire to reach a final destination can only lead to the elimination of the political and the destruction of democracy. In a democratic polity, conflicts and confrontations, far from being a sign of imperfection, indicate that democracy is alive and inhabited by pluralism.”

(Mouffe 2000: 34)

4. It is through contesting dominant discourses that the fourth political activity can emerge:

<sup>14</sup> Modernity’s idea of knowledge “aims at formulating laws in the light of observed regularities and with a view to foreseeing future behaviour of phenomena” (Santos 1995: 14); it adopts values such as objectivity, order, stability and universality. A postmodern idea of knowledge would emphasise knowledge as always partial, perspectival and provisional, “local knowledge created and disseminated through argumentative discourse” (p. 37).

*opening up for change*, through developing a critical approach to what exists and envisioning utopias and turning them into utopian action. For as Foucault (1988) also notes, there is a close connection between contesting dominant discourses, thinking differently and change: “As soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult and quite possible.”

Some readers may question the omission here of another activity: an education in democracy or citizenship as an explicit part of the curriculum. In doing so, I follow Dewey’s view that education should, first and foremost, be about *being* democratic, with an emphasis on democratic organisation and culture, rather than about preparing the individual for future democracy, becoming a citizen: “Much of our present education fails because it neglects this fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life” (Dewey 1897: 78). Democracy is, in short, not so much a goal as a process (London 2000).

Biesta and Lawy (2006) take a similar view when they argue the need to move from an idea of ‘teaching citizenship’ to ‘learning democracy’. They criticise the former on grounds of its individualistic approach and its assumption that citizenship is an outcome and young people, therefore, are not-yet-citizens. Instead they assume a concept of citizenship and democracy as something that people continuously do, that young people are always participants in social life, and that being a citizen

“involves much more than the simple acquisition of certain fixed core values and dispositions. It is participative and as such it is itself an inherently participative process” (p. 73).

If democracy is a way of living and relating, and if children are citizens and subjects with rights from birth, then democracy is learnt in life and through relationships, including the democratic practice of the nursery or school, not as a distinct subject confined to set periods and a set curriculum.

### **Not just on paper: Some examples of democratic experimentalism**

The model of democratic experimentalism is less developed than its market counterpart. It lacks the theoretical and policy attention lavished on the latter by international organisations, governments, academics and companies. But it does exist. There are examples where democracy, and to a lesser extent experimentalism, have been explicitly proposed as basic values for ECEC services; in some examples, these values have been acted on to create services. Occasionally these examples are part of and supported by national or local government, enjoying the backing of formal democratic institutions. More often, they are local upwellings that emerge from a particular combination of local conditions and serve a small area. But these local projects provide evidence of the large reserves of inventiveness, solidarity and commitment to the public good that are available in our societies, reserves that are too often ignored and underused.

A few of these examples are cited in this section; further research would reveal more, probably many more. They demonstrate the existence and viability of the model in practice, albeit not always in complete form. They provide pointers as to how the model might be implemented, which is the subject of the section after this.

### ***Starting strong and the Nordic countries***

The first example is not of actual policy or provision, but of an international organisation recognising and proposing the centrality of democracy for ECEC services. The OECD thematic review of early childhood education and care, *Starting strong*, is (in my view) the most important cross-national study in this field. After eight years' work in 20 countries, the final report concludes with a call "to aspire toward ECEC systems that support broad learning, participation and democracy". This means "an early childhood system founded on democratic values", that encourages "democratic reflexes in children", and that recognises the "democratic dimension" in parental involvement, "that is the exercise by parents of their basic right to be involved in the education of their children" (OECD 2006: 218–219). The report envisages "early childhood services as a life space where educators and families work together to promote the well-being, participation and learning of young children ... based on the principle of democratic participation" and notes that "this principle can also work effectively in management" (p. 220).

This conclusion by OECD is inspired, in part, by a national policy: the Swedish national pre-

school curriculum, with its clear commitment to democracy as the basis for ECEC services:

"Democracy forms the foundation of the pre-school. For this reason, all pre-school activity should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values."

(Ministry of Education and Science [Sweden] 1998: 6).

Other Nordic countries, too, pay explicit attention to the importance of democracy in their early childhood curricula. Wagner (2006) argues that democracy is central to the Nordic concept of what is a 'good childhood' and notes, in support of this contention, that "official policy documents and curriculum guidelines in the Nordic countries acknowledge a central expectation that pre-schools and schools will exemplify democratic principles and that children will be active participants in these democratic environments" (p. 292).

The strong value attached to democracy in the Nordic states is expressed not only at the level of the individual citizen but also in strong decentralisation of responsibility to local authorities and individual ECEC services. Unitary central governments create clear and strong national frameworks that include material conditions, entitlements to access, and values and goals for services. But these frameworks leave considerable scope for local authorities and individual services to interpret and also to experiment with a wide variety of pedagogical theories and practices.



### ***Reggio Emilia***

After these international and national sources of inspiration, there are examples of local experiences built on democracy as a basic value. The best known – but not the only – example, is the city of Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy, where the municipality has created, since the early 1960s, a network of ECEC centres for children from birth to six years, termed ‘municipal schools’; they have achieved worldwide fame and recognition for their pedagogical practice, the US magazine *Newsweek* singling out a Reggio Emilian nursery school as the best nursery in the world, while the OECD Starting strong report praises Reggio Emilia, by name, for its outstanding work (OECD 2006: 207). This work has been based on a strong commitment to democracy, both as a reaction to a previous experience of authoritarian Fascist government (Dahlberg 1995) but also as a positive principle. I will return later to give some examples of what this means in practice, but for the moment refer to the words of three Reggio *pedagogistas* (experienced educators who each work with a small number of centres to deepen understanding of learning):

“[The educational project of Reggio Emilia] is by definition a participation-based project: its true educational meaning is to be found in the participation of all concerned. This means that everyone – children, teachers and parents – is involved in sharing ideas, in discussion, in a sense of common purpose and with communication as a value. ... So in the Reggio Emilia experience, participation does not mean simply the involvement

of families in the life of the school. Rather it is a value, an identifying feature of the entire experience, a way of viewing those involved in the educational process and the role of the school. The subjects of participation then, even before the parents, are the children, who are considered to be active constructors of their own learning and producers of original points of view concerning the world. ... This idea of participation, therefore, defines the early childhood centre as a social and political place and thus as an educational place in the fullest sense. However, this is not a given, so to speak; it is not a natural, intrinsic part of being a school. It is a philosophical choice, a choice based on values.”

(Cagliari, Barozzi and Giudici 2004: 28–29)

Note that in this quotation, participation is defined as a quality – an “identifying feature” – of the system of municipal schools, rather than as a quality of the good parent; the emphasis is on the participatory school and local project, rather than the participating parent, the former being assumed to enable the latter.

Another feature of Reggio Emilia that provides inspiration is its commitment not only to democracy but also to experimentation: it can indeed be described as a pedagogical experiment in a whole community that has run for more than 40 years. The municipal schools have been likened to “one big laboratory, a ‘workshop of learning and knowledge’” (Rinaldi 2006: 81) and “a permanent laboratory, in which children’s and teachers’ research processes are strongly



intertwined and constantly evolving” (p. 126). Experimentation is based on deep curiosity, a desire to cross borders of disciplines and perspectives, an openness to uncertainty and complexity, and a recognition of the importance of research – not by outside experts (though they have long-standing and productive collaborations with leading academic researchers such as Jerome Bruner, Gunilla Dahlberg and Howard Gardner), but by local participants, understanding that:

“[R]esearch can and should take place as much in the classroom and by teachers as in the university and by ‘academics’. ... The word ‘research’, in this sense, leaves – or rather, demands to come out of – the scientific laboratories, thus ceasing to be a privilege of the few (in universities and other designated places) to become the stance, the attitude with which teachers approach the sense and meaning of life.”

(Rinaldi 2006: 148)

Reggio Emilia is an example of a commitment to democracy and experimentation that links together individual centres, both to each other in a network of services, and to an active local authority. It has stood the test of time well, with the first centre being founded more than 40 years ago. Over this period, this network of municipal centres has shown an ability to maintain its democratic principles and, through experimentalism, generate new thought and practice. By singling out Reggio Emilia, it is not my intention to imply it is the only experience at the level of a local authority founded on and permeated by democratic values and a desire to

experiment: other communities in Italy could be cited (see, for example, Fortunati 2006 for an example of a similar experience in a small Tuscan commune), and there could well be examples from other countries.

### *Sheffield Children’s Centre*

Last but not least, democratic experimentalism can be practiced at the level of individual centres. An example is the Sheffield Children’s Centre. Started in a northern English city in the early 1980s as a local community initiative, the Centre has grown to provide a wide range of services for hundreds of children and young people from infancy to 18 years, as well as their families, in an inner city area of economic disadvantage; its work has also extended to initiating projects in Ethiopia, Jordan, Pakistan and Zimbabwe. The Centre, run as a co-operative, provides a range of ‘core’ services, including ECEC, and free-time and play services for school-age children, but also a variety of other services for families in its local community and beyond, many of whom are from minority ethnic backgrounds: health services, language workshops, a contact centre where children can meet parents from whom they are separated, support for terminally ill children and parents, adult training opportunities, an advocacy, welfare rights and legal support service, and many more besides. As well as more formalised services, the Centre’s workers provide important support by ‘walking alongside’ families in difficulty, as this family vignette illustrates:

“I came to the centre for help with domestic violence. They found us a refuge and went

back to the house to get our things. My husband left the country after this and they found us a house in Sheffield and helped us furnish it. They got us school placements and gave us a baby place at their nursery and got me a place on an access course in college. My children go to the violence support group. Everyone knows it's the place to go for help. They never turn anyone away. The centre has kept us alive and safe and it has helped get over the violence. He would have killed us. In our community there is no escape and it is expected women stay with their husbands. The centre gave us a different path to escape and the centre's cultural workers made it OK with our community."

(Broadhead, Meleady and Delgado 2008: 36–37; see this reference for many other family vignettes and a fuller description and analysis of the work of the Centre).

Underpinning this work is a strong commitment to diversity (most unusually, it has a mixed-gender workforce with almost equal numbers of men and women, but diversity covers many other dimensions including ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, age and disability); to children's rights; to equal opportunities; and to democracy, building on its original and continuing co-operative status.

"[The Centre's identity] reflects the desire of ordinary people to influence social change based on local demands. The centre began because local people expressed concerns about the cultural inappropriateness of a mainstream provision close by and it grew

because its aim was to reflect diversity in all its practices. This aspiration has been its strength and its greatest challenge and locates the centre, as described by Dahlberg and Moss (2005: 171) as 'a site for democratic practice and minor politics'."

(Broadhead, Meleady and Delgado 2008: 3)

Sheffield Children's Centre provides a vivid and well-documented example of the ECEC institution in the model of democratic experimentalism: inclusive, participatory and, consequently, innovative – but in response to and in dialogue with the community of which it is part, not individual consumers. In a study of the Centre, Delgado has drawn on the work of Manuel Castells on network societies (Castells 2004) to argue that it can be viewed as "a grassroots social movement, which has developed a number of innovations based on values and beliefs and on an attempt to embrace social inclusion" (Delgado 2006: 2). In so doing it has made the transition from a 'resistance identity' to a 'project identity': "Like *resistance identities*, *project identities* resist domination, but they also propose – and eventually implement – alternatives to oppressive mainstream ideas" (p. 207, original emphasis). The experimentation in this case consists of an openness to constructing alternative ways to engage with children, families and community.

Are there other individual centres that, like Sheffield Children's Centre, exemplify democratic experimentalism – centres generating innovative projects through participation and responsiveness to the conditions and values

of their local communities, centres that are motivated not by the disciplines of the market but by a deep sense of responsibility and a commitment to participation and inclusion? On the basis of first-hand knowledge, written accounts and word-of-mouth descriptions, I believe there are and that they exist in most countries. How many are there? Possibly many more, but it is impossible to say for sure, partly because they have received too little policy and research attention; our ability to evaluate the model and its potential is severely hampered by this neglect.

A final example at the level of the individual centre concerns experimentalism as an everyday practice in early childhood education, i.e. as a way of teaching and learning. This means questioning a representational view of knowledge – one that understands knowledge to be an objective, stable and accurate representation of a pre-existing reality, and learning as a sender-receiver model of transmitting knowledge that presumes an exact and unmediated transfer from a knower to a learner – “the instrumentalist view that communication is unambiguous and unmediated, and results in unproblematic transference with full conservation of intent” (Roy 2004: 298). This means taking seriously what we know about the complexity of learning, children’s diverse strategies and multiple theories of knowledge. This requires an educator who is:

“... more attentive to creating possibilities than pursuing predefined goals ... removed from the fallacy of certainties, [assuming instead] responsibility to choose, experiment,

discuss, reflect and change, focusing on the organisation of opportunities rather than the anxiety of pursuing outcomes, and maintaining in her work the pleasure of amazement and wonder.”

(Fortunati 2006: 37).

This means, too, working with theoretical perspectives that welcome complexity, diversity and experimentation, for instance the writings of post-structural theorists – such as Foucault, Bakhtin, Derrida and Deleuze – in which, as Tobin notes, “many of us have found ... a language we can use to confront the taken-for-granted assumptions of the [early childhood] field” (Tobin 2007: 28). An important and hopeful development in early childhood education and care is the increasing interest in applying these theoretical perspectives to everyday pedagogical work in the nursery, and the growing literature documenting this experimentation. A recent example is a book by Liselott Marriet Olsson (2009) called *Movement and Experimentation in Young Children’s Learning*. Starting from the premise that young children and their learning are tamed, predicted, supervised, controlled and evaluated according to predetermined standards, the book argues that the challenge to practice and research is to find ways of regaining movement and experimentation in learning. Inspired by the work of French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Olsson demonstrates the possibilities for experimentation in the classroom through documenting and analysis of extensive experience in Swedish pre-schools:

“In many of the pre-schools in the city of Stockholm and its suburbs and at the Stockholm Institute of Education, ‘everyday magical moments’ take place. Children, pre-school teachers, teacher students, teacher educators and researchers come together and are literally caught up in the desire to experiment with subjectivity and learning. In these practices, experimentations and intense, unpredictable events are taking place, concerning the idea of what a child is, what a teacher should do, the purpose of a pre-school and its organisation, contents and forms.”

(Olsson, 2009)

Central to this experimental approach has been pedagogical documentation, providing a collaborative meeting place for all participants, and project work:

“... where children and teachers collectively are constructing problems in intense learning processes and where the content of knowledge is constructed and negotiated rather than transmitted and reproductively imitated. The focus in the projects is on the multiplicity of perspectives that all participants can bring, and many different means to approach the content of knowledge are being used; aesthetic, ethical, political and scientific approaches are all employed and put to work in the learning processes that are taking place. In relation to the content of knowledge, children’s thinking, talking and doing are as valued as any other perspective

and are often seen as important and additional perspectives on the content of knowledge as it is known and already defined by adults, culture and history.”

(Olsson, 2009)

Experimentation, in the group setting, is the antithesis of so much early childhood education today, with its desire to predict, control, observe and evaluate against predefined goals, and its premise that there is one correct answer to every question, one true path of development. Olsson’s examples show, time after time, how listening, an important value of democracy, is linked to “collective, intense and unpredictable experimentation, where one can explore unknown and unexpected ways of thinking, talking and doing.” This linkage between democracy and experimentation in early childhood practice is a central theme of Dahlberg and Bloch, who argue that:

“[T]o construct a community of inquirers with an experimental spirit requires listening and a radical dialogue. In ‘real’ listening, children become partners in a process of experimentation and research by inventing problems and by listening to and negotiating what other children, as well as the teacher, are saying and doing. In this process the co-constructing pedagogue has to open herself/himself to the unexpected and experiment together with the children – in the here-and-now event. S/he challenges the children by augmenting connections through enlarging the number of concepts, hypotheses and

theories, as well as through new material and through challenging children's more technical work. Besides getting a responsible relation to other children by listening, they also are negotiating in between each other, enlarging the choices that can be made, instead of bringing choice down to universal trivialisations."

(Dahlberg and Bloch 2006: 114)

## Conditions for democratic experimentalism

### *Understandings*

The model of democratic experimentalism needs supportive conditions, providing a rich environment in which democracy can flourish. I have already referred to one of these conditions: a commitment to and support of democracy by all levels of government and an image or understanding of the early childhood institution as a public forum or meeting place. Democracy is unlikely to thrive where, for example, government prioritises consumer over collective choice and early childhood institutions are seen and understood as if they were businesses selling commodities and/or factories for producing predetermined outcomes.

But other images or understandings are also important for bringing politics into the nursery; for example the image of the child, of parents

and of workers. I have already outlined how democratic experimentalism presumes a particular subject – adult or child – who is socially responsible and a rights-bearing citizen. More specifically, the *child*, in the model of democratic experimentalism, is understood not only as a competent citizen, but also as an expert in her own life, having opinions that are worth listening to; she has the right and competence to participate in collective decision-making. There is recognition, too, that children (but also adults) have, in the words of Malaguzzi, a hundred languages in which to express themselves<sup>15</sup>, and that democratic practice means being 'multilingual'. The importance of such multilingualism is highlighted by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child: "[Young children] can make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes *in numerous ways*, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language" (2005: 7).

Parents in a democratic institution are seen as competent citizens "because they have and develop their own experience, points of view, interpretation and ideas ... which are the fruits of their experience as parents and citizens" (Cagliari, Barozzi and Giudici 2004: 30).

Last, but not least, *workers* are understood as practitioners of democracy. While recognising

<sup>15</sup> Rinaldi describes the theory of the hundred languages as "one of Malaguzzi's most important works":

"The hundred languages of children is not only a metaphor for crediting children and adults with a hundred, a thousand creative and communicative potentials. ... But above all it is a declaration of the equal dignity and importance of all languages, not only writing, reading and counting, which has become more and more obviously necessary for the construction of knowledge." (Rinaldi, 2005: 175)

that they bring an important perspective and a relevant local knowledge to the democratic forum, they also understand that they do not have the truth nor privileged access to knowledge. As Paulo Freire puts it, the educator may offer her ‘reading of the world’, but her role is to “bring out the fact that there are other ‘readings of the world’” (Freire 2004: 96), at times in opposition to her own. This understanding of the worker is embodied in what Oberhuemer (2005) has termed ‘democratic professionalism’:

“[I]t is a concept based on participatory relationships and alliances. It foregrounds collaborative, co-operative action between professional colleagues and other stakeholders. It emphasises engaging and networking with the local community. ... [T]here is a growing body of literature which questions traditional notions of professionalism, notions which distance professionals from those they serve and prioritise one group’s knowledge over another.”

(Oberhuemer 2005: 13)

### Values

Democratic and experimental practice needs certain values to be shared among the community of the early childhood institution, for example:

- *Respect for diversity*, through adopting a relational ethics that gives the highest value to diversity. Gunilla Dahlberg and I have explored such an ethics (Dahlberg and Moss 2005). This ‘ethics of an encounter’, associated with the work of Emmanuel Levinas, starts from Levinas’ challenge to a strong Western philosophical tradition that gives primacy to knowing and leads us to ‘grasp’ the other in our desire to know – by ‘grasping’, we make the other into the same. An example is developmental stages, a system of classification that gives adults possibilities to ‘grasp’ (possess and comprehend) the child. The ethics of an encounter attempts to counter this grasping through respect for the absolute alterity of the Other, his or her absolute otherness or singularity. For example: ‘This is another whom I cannot represent and classify into my system of categories, whom I cannot seek to know by imposing my framework of thought and understanding’<sup>16</sup>.
- *Recognition of multiple perspectives and paradigms*, acknowledging and welcoming that there is more than one answer to most questions and that there are many ways of viewing and understanding the world (the importance of recognising paradigmatic difference – for example, between positivistic and post-foundational paradigms – and the failure to do so in many policy documents is discussed further in Moss 2007b).
- *Welcoming curiosity, uncertainty and subjectivity*, and the responsibility that they require of us. Curiosity and uncertainty

<sup>16</sup> The implications for education are very great: Putting everything one encounters into pre-made categories implies we make the Other into the Same, as everything that does not fit into these categories, which is unfamiliar and not taken-for-granted has to be overcome... To think another whom I cannot grasp is an important shift and it challenges the whole scene of pedagogy (Dahlberg, 2003: 270)

leave us open to complexity, diversity and the unpredicted and hinder governing through normalisation. Subjectivity calls for walking a fine line between “the illusion of determining objective decisions, while at the same time avoiding the immanent possibility of arbitrary subjectivism” (Ransom 2003: 475) – or, in Lather’s phrase, striving for ‘rigorous subjectivity’, through deliberation with others.

- *Critical thinking*, which is:

“... a matter of introducing a critical attitude towards those things that are given to our present experience as if they were timeless, natural, unquestionable: to stand against the maxims of one’s time, against the spirit of one’s age, against the current of received wisdom. ... [It is a matter] of interrupting the fluency of the narratives that encode that experience and making them stutter.”

(Rose 1999: 20).

An important element of critical thinking, of making narratives stutter, is to ensure a continuous interrogation of possible meanings: questioning, contesting and denaturalising influential concepts and ideas – including ‘democratic experimentalism’.

The importance of such values for fostering democratic practice is captured in these words by three *pedagogistas* from Reggio Emilia, on

the subject of participation in their municipal schools:

“Participation is based on the idea that reality is not objective, that culture is a constantly evolving product of society, that individual knowledge is only partial; and that in order to construct a project, everyone’s point of view is relevant in dialogue with those of others, within a framework of shared values. The idea of participation is founded on these concepts: and in our opinion, so, too, is democracy itself.”

(Cagliari, Barozzi and Giudici 2004: 29)

### **Tools**

As well as shared understandings and values, the practice of democratic experimentalism in early childhood institutions needs certain material conditions and tools. Of particular importance is pedagogical documentation, by which practice and learning processes are made visible<sup>17</sup> and then subject – in relationship with

others – to critical thought, dialogue, reflection, interpretation and, if necessary, democratic evaluation and decision-making. So, key features are visibility, multiple perspectives and the co-construction of meanings (for fuller discussions of pedagogical documentation see Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 2007; Rinaldi 2005). Originating in early childhood centres in Northern Italy, particularly in the city of

<sup>17</sup> Visibility can be achieved in many ways: through notes or observation of children’s work, videos or photographs, taped conversations or children’s drawings or constructions in different materials – the possibilities are almost endless.



Reggio Emilia, pedagogical documentation has since been taken up in many countries, both in Europe and beyond.

Pedagogical documentation has a central role to play in many facets of the early childhood institution: planning pedagogical work; evaluation as meaning making; professional development; research by children and adults; and ensuring that new knowledge created from evaluation, professional development and research is shared as a common good. Cross-cutting these particular uses, is the contribution of pedagogical documentation to democratic practice in the early childhood institution.

Loris Malaguzzi, one of the great pedagogical thinkers of the last century and the first director of the early childhood services in Reggio Emilia, saw documentation in this democratic light, as his biographer Alfredo Hoyuelos writes:

“[Documentation] is one of the keys to Malaguzzi’s philosophy. Behind this practice, I believe, is the ideological and ethical concept of a transparent school and transparent education. ... A political idea also emerges, which is that what schools do must have public visibility. ... Documentation in all its different forms also represents an extraordinary tool for dialogue, for exchange, for sharing. For Malaguzzi it means the possibility to discuss and to dialogue ‘everything with everyone’ (teachers, auxiliary staff, cooks, families, administrators and citizens. ... [S]haring opinions by means of documentation presupposes being able to discuss

real, concrete things – not just theories or words, about which it is possible to reach easy and naïve agreement.”

(Hoyuelos 2004: 7)

Carlina Rinaldi, Malaguzzi’s successor as director of Reggio Emilia’s services, similarly speaks of documentation as democratic practice: “Sharing the documentation means participation in a true act of democracy, sustaining the culture and visibility of childhood, both inside and outside the school: democratic participation, or ‘participant democracy’, that is a product of exchange and visibility” (Rinaldi 2005: 59.)

Pedagogical documentation can also be seen as providing a form of democratic or public accountability, which is very different to a particular form of ‘neoliberal’ accountability that, Ransom argues, has developed in recent years, based on the market, contract and inspection. This latter regime, he contends, has failed to achieve its purposes of institutional achievement and public trust:

“Achievement grows out of the internal goods of motivation to improve (that follows recognition and the mutual deliberation of purpose) rather than the external imposition of quantifiable targets, while public trust follows deliberation of common purpose out of difference and discord, rather than forces of competition. ... Trust and achievement can only merge in a framework of public accountability that enables different accounts of public purpose and practice to be deliberated in a democratic public



sphere: constituted to include difference, enable participation, voice and dissent, through to collective judgement and decision, that is in turn accountable to the public.”

(Ransom 2003: 476)

Pedagogical documentation – with the importance it attaches to different accounts, participation, deliberation and collective judgement – seems well suited to this ideal of public accountability, and therefore to the goals of institutional achievement and public trust.

As indicated above, documentation today is widely practised in various forms and for various purposes. An example with which I am particularly familiar is the Mosaic approach developed by my colleague Alison Clark to give voice to the perspectives of young children. This approach uses a variety of methods to generate documentation with children: these methods include observation, child interviewing, photography (by children themselves), and tours and mapmaking. The documentation so generated is then subject to review, reflection and discussion by children and adults – a process of interpretation or meaning making. Inspired by pedagogical documentation, the Mosaic approach has been used for a range of purposes, including to understand better how children experience life in the nursery (the main question being ‘what does it mean to be in this place?’) and to enable the participation by young children in the design of new buildings and outdoor spaces. Here is yet another example of how pedagogical documentation is a key tool for democratic practice, in this case young

children’s contribution to decision-making (Clark and Moss 2005; Clark 2005).

It is important to keep in mind that pedagogical documentation is not child observation; it is not, and would never claim to be, a means of getting a ‘true’ picture of what children can do nor a technology of normalisation, a method of assessing a child’s conformity to some developmental norm. It does not, for example, assume an objective, external truth about the child that can be recorded and accurately represented. It adopts instead the values of subjectivity and multiplicity: it can never be neutral, being always perspectival (Dahlberg et al. 1999). Understood in this way, as a means for exploring and contesting different perspectives, pedagogical documentation not only becomes a means of resisting power, including dominant discourses, but also a means of fostering democratic and experimental practice.

### ***Educated workers***

Not only does democracy in the ECEC centre require workers who are understood, both by themselves and others, as practitioners of democracy “with a professional obligation to create an educational environment which will sustain the development of democratic virtues and practices” (Carr and Hartnett 1996: 195); It also requires a workforce whose initial and continuous professional development supports them in this role. This includes a capacity to work with uncertainty – in Fortunati’s words, “removed from the fallacy of certainties” (Fortunati 2006: 37) – and to be open to the possibility of other perspectives and knowledge.

Also important is the ability to discuss, exchange, reflect and argue – in short to be able to dialogue. Dialogue, Paulo Freire says, is the way “people achieve significance as human beings. ... It is an act of creation ... [it is] founded upon love, humility, and faith” (Freire 1996: 70); it cannot exist without critical thinking, “thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity” (p. 73); “it is the opportunity available to me to open up to the thinking of others” (Freire 2004: 103). Carlina Rinaldi shares Freire’s belief in the centrality and transformatory potential of dialogue. It is, she says, of absolute importance: “an idea of dialogue not as an exchange but as a process of transformation where you lose absolutely the possibility of controlling the final result” (Rinaldi 2005: 184). Note Rinaldi’s rejection here of the ‘exchange paradigm’ and her openness to the unpredicted, the unexpected, the ungoverned.

An important role in supporting a democratic workforce is that of critical friend or mentor, for example the *pedagogista* of northern Italy, an experienced educator working with a small number of centres to support dialogue, critical thought and pedagogical documentation. Working in a democratic way with children and adults in these centres, especially with pedagogical documentation, the *pedagogista* can make an important contribution to the continuous professional development of practitioners of democracy and to democratic practice throughout the nursery.

## Research

Research that supports a model of democratic experimentalism needs both to embody the values of this model and to provide knowledge that can support its implementation. Judged against these criteria, much research in ECEC is not supportive, adopting instead an instrumental rationale, a positivistic paradigm and a technical role; the focus has been on expert identification of which technologies most effectively produce an assemblage of predetermined outcomes. Policy analysis has been dominated by this positivistic work, either unaware of or ignoring research from other perspectives. This dominant research discourse is, I would argue, problematic on at least four counts.

First, it falls into the pitfall of ‘scientism’ in social science – “understood as the tendency to believe that science holds a reliable method of reaching the truth about the nature of things” (Flyvbjerg 2004: 412). This critique has given rise to what has been called the ‘Flyvbjerg Debate’, after Bent Flyvbjerg, an urban geographer in Denmark, who stimulated the debate with the publication of his book *Making Social Science Matter* (Flyvbjerg 2001; Schram and Caterino 2006). Flyvbjerg, like others before him, calls for the social sciences to abandon attempts to emulate the natural sciences, arguing that context and the meaning making (interpretation) of social actors makes social and natural science unavoidably different:

“The natural science approach simply does not work in the social sciences. No predictive theories have been arrived at in social science,

despite centuries of trying. ... Regardless of how much we let mathematical and statistical modelling dominate the social sciences, they are unlikely to become scientific in the natural science sense. This is because the phenomena modelled are social, and thus 'answer back' in ways natural phenomena do not. ... [I]f the social context cannot be formalised in terms of features and rules, then social theory cannot be complete and predictive in the manner of much natural science theory, which does not have the problem of self-interpretive objects of study."

(Flyvbjerg 2006: 38–39)

Another way of putting this is to say that life is irreducibly complex, singular, unstable, unpredictable and uncertain. It is, in short, messy. (Early childhood) education has outcomes, but they emerge from interactions, embedded in complex contexts, and are necessarily undeterminable (Urban 2008: 144).

Second, this dominant form of research is understood and practised in an exclusive and exclusionary way, treated as the domain of certain experts in the academy and as the practice of certain techniques and procedures. But research can also be viewed more broadly: as a way of thinking and approaching life, in which the educator can also be a researcher (Rinaldi 2005). Hind broadens the argument further, arguing that researching is a task that can be undertaken by citizens acting as public researchers as a way of reviving Kant's goal for the Enlightenment of an end to intellectual tutelage: "I do think, however, that as individu-

als we can assess evidence and information with a certain degree of impartiality, and that collectively we can pool and synthesise the results of our work and thereby come ever closer to an adequate description of political reality" (Hind 2007: 138). This more inclusive view of research would not exclude academics, nor ignore their particular expertise; but it would include and value the participation of others, including educators, parents, children and the wider citizenry. I have already mentioned one method – pedagogical documentation – that would enable research to become embedded in the everyday life of the nursery or school; but there are others.

Third, the concentration of research on a narrow approach conducted by a narrow class of experts has meant the neglect of a more democratic, contextualised and pluralist research, which would include *inter alia* more attention paid to understanding and evaluating other models of ECEC. Lather (2006) argues that critical case studies, strategically chosen, are of great importance. These might include, for example, experiences (whether governments, nurseries or small groups) that have emphasised democracy and/or experimentation, whether this is a study of a particular institution or a particular project or sequence of projects.

Sharing this line of thinking, Flyvbjerg argues for a social science that draws on the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, a type of practical knowledge or wisdom "that comes from an intimate familiarity with the contingencies and uncertainties of various forms of social practice

embedded in complex social settings” (Flyvbjerg 2001: 8). ‘Phronetic social science’ is aware of the inescapability of meaning, perspective and context, and concentrates on contributing to reflexive analysis and deliberation about values and interests: “It is concerned with facilitating engagement between different points of view and the process of learning that occurs as the result of such engagement” (Gordon 2007: 1784). This view of social science is

“... based on interpretation and is open for testing in relation to other interpretations and other research. ... [It] is dialogical in the sense that it incorporates and, if successful, is incorporated into a polyphony of voices. No one voice, including that of the researcher, may claim final authority. The aim is to produce input to dialogue and praxis in social affairs, rather than to generate ultimate, unequivocally verified ‘knowledge’. ... [T]he purpose of social science is not to develop epistemic theory, but to contribute to society’s practical rationality by elucidating where we are, where we want to go, and what is desirable according to different sets of values and interests. The goal of the phronetic approach becomes contributing to society’s capacity for value-rational deliberation and action.”

(Flyvbjerg 2006: 41–42)

Fourth, the attention given to the technical role of research is at the expense of another equally important role: the cultural role of research. Rather than focusing on means, strategies and techniques to achieve given ends (i.e. the tech-

nical role), the cultural role provides different ways of understanding and imagining social reality. Adopting this role, research:

“... can also play a valuable role in helping educational practitioners to acquire a different understanding of their practice, in helping them to see and imagine their practice differently. ... By looking through a different theoretical lens, we may also be able to understand problems where we did not understand them before, or even to see problems where we did not see them before (think, for example, of the ways in which feminist scholarship has helped us precisely to make problems visible.”

(Biesta 2007: 19)

Biesta explicitly links the cultural role of research to democracy: policy research devoted only to technical questions is “a threat to democracy itself”, which needs “critical inquiry into normative and political questions about what is educationally desirable” (p. 21).

The argument is not to banish or denigrate technico-instrumental research; we need research about means, closely related to research about ends (Biesta 2007). The argument is about getting such research into perspective, viewing it as just one part of a spectrum of possibilities, providing a value-based perspective and a local knowledge (like all other research), and requiring contextualisation and interpretation. In a model of democratic experimentalism, the need is for diversifying research and its practice to better reflect diversity of paradigms

and perspectives; to view it as an aid to understanding, reflection and action, not a prescription for action; to recognise that research can escape neither context nor the complexities and contradictions of existence; and to use it as a contribution to democratic deliberation about ends and means and possibilities.

Any model, not least democratic experimentalism, requires research to provide understanding of processes, evaluation of outcomes (both predefined and unpredicted), and a degree of ‘democratic accountability’. I agree with Lather when she argues for “fuzzying the lines between empirical research, politics and the philosophical renewal of public deliberation” and for applied work “with a critical edge that can improve the quality of practice by taking into account complexity and the messiness of practice-in-context” (Lather 2006: 788, 789). ECEC that is based on democratic experimentalism requires commensurate research.

### *Time*

Before finishing this discussion, I want to flag up what is both a major issue and one that is particularly difficult to get to grips with: time. Democratic experimentalism in ECEC services, indeed anywhere (including schools), calls for active participation and deliberation. It is far more demanding than democracy reduced to occasional voting by adults, and one of its demands is time, which is in short supply today when we are so unceasingly busy.

A strange feature of English policy in early childhood and compulsory schooling, perhaps

too in some other countries, is the emphasis given today to ‘parental involvement’ when parents appear to be busier than ever. So on the one hand, policy values employment for fathers and mothers; while at the same time, policy values parents being involved in their children’s education, as well as endlessly (and rather tritely) emphasising their role as ‘first’ educators. There is an interesting tension here – though less so than might at first appear, as involvement is primarily understood in policy terms as parents reinforcing taken-for-granted educational objectives and targets (parents-as-assistants): involvement, understood as critical democratic participation (parents-as-citizens), is likely to make more demands on time.

Far more thought needs to be given to the question of time, and how we might be able to redistribute it across a range of activities and relationships, in particular to enable parents to participate in a democratic and experimental early childhood institution without having to forego participation in paid employment. White argues that the demand for the time needed for democracy creates “a possible tension with the market, which is also generally hungry for people’s time and energy” (White 2008: 20). He argues for government limiting working hours in the interest of advancing active citizenship. Beck proposes the concept of ‘public work’ that would provide “a new focus of activity and identity that will revitalise the democratic way of life” (Beck 1998: 60) and suggests various ways of paying for public work. Unger also identifies the need for bridging the gap between the ‘production system’ and the ‘caring economy’:

“It is fundamentally important that every able-bodied adult should have a position in both the production system and the caring economy. ... We have to try different things. It can be weekend work. It can be a month in the year. It can be two years in everyone’s life.”

(Unger 2005b: 180)

While Unger here is envisaging a changing relationship for the whole population, the need to enable parents, who are already carers, to have time to participate in ECEC services (and schools) can be subsumed into this discussion. This might be facilitated by his proposal “to fashion legal arrangements that facilitate the division of work time between the production system and the caring economy” (Unger 2004: xcvi). One possibility involves moving away from current ‘parental leave’ policies, narrowly defined as enabling mothers and fathers to have more time to care for very young children or care temporarily for children who are ill; and turning towards a far broader ‘time credit’ policy, giving citizens the right to a certain amount of paid leave over a working lifetime, to use for a variety of purposes, including participation in children’s services (a unique example

of a national ‘time credit’ policy can be found in Belgium; for more information see Fusulier, forthcoming 2009).

Any policies intended to increase the time available to parents for participation in ECEC (or school) services needs to be genuinely ‘parental’; that is, it needs to be designed to enable and encourage use by fathers and mothers, to be monitored to ensure use by both, and re-designed if the monitoring proves it is ineffective – for mothers or fathers or both parents. Otherwise it will fall into the pitfall of so many policies aimed at parents, simply reinforcing women’s perceived and actual primary responsibility for young children and contributing to the maintenance of gender inequality. (For a discussion of designing parental leave policies to support use by fathers, a related issue, see Moss 2008b).

Nor is the need for time confined to parents. Workers in ECEC services need space in their working lives to devote to documentation and dialogue, not just to prepare future work but to be able to reflect upon, interpret, exchange and evaluate current practice.

## Chapter 3: Comparing ECEC systems under the different models

What implications do these different models have for the way ECEC systems are structured, in particular access, type of service, management, workforce and funding?

Under the market model, services provide a specific and specified product to consumers who are willing and able to pay: most commonly, ‘childcare for working parents’. Access, therefore, is determined by consumer need and purchasing power and is likely to be mainly to single function specialist services, for example nurseries supplying ‘childcare’ for children of working parents. These services are managed by their owners, who respond to consumer demand and to the need to make a return on capital, though this may be mediated by the extent of government regulation and the system in place for ensuring compliance. The workforce is viewed, first and foremost, as technicians, delivering prescribed technologies to achieve prescribed outcomes, with earnings set at a level that ensures ‘affordability’ for consumers and a profit for owners. Funding relies mainly on fees, paid by parents-as-consumers, supplemented by demand-side subsidies paid in some form (e.g. tax credits, vouchers) to lower-income parents.

In the democratic experimental model, access is an entitlement of citizenship and is to a multi-purpose service, a children’s centre, which is a multi-purpose public institution capable of many projects and open to all families in

the local community, irrespective of parental employment status. Publicly funded services are provided by a range of public and private sector organisations, the main condition being a willingness to be experimental and democratic, as well as conforming to the common conditions specified in the national framework of entitlements, standards and objectives (which would include, *inter alia*, a common policy on parental fees, staff qualifications and pay). ‘Democratic’ in this context means adopting a participatory approach, broadly defined, including everyday relationships and practices as well as more formal involvement of children and adults in decision-making, evaluation and other activities. FP providers are not, therefore, excluded on principle, but have to find ways of reconciling business imperatives with democratic and experimental practice and the national framework of standards and entitlements.

Services work within the democratically agreed national framework, which leaves substantial scope for local and institutional interpretation and additional goals. Oversight is supplied through the democratic participation of children and adults, including the use of pedagogical documentation as an evaluative tool, and through the close involvement of *pedagogistas*. Municipal politicians are expected to participate in documentation, so gaining first-hand knowledge of the services for which they are responsible, rather than relying simply on

reports or ‘quality’ evaluations from managers or inspectors; indeed, a major goal of democratic experimentalism is to connect democratic services with the formal structures of local democracy. Services that caused sustained concern and proved unable to reform would be closed – but only as a last resort and after much collaborative work.

The workforce is viewed as reflective democratic professionals, whose initial and continuing professional development equips them to create, sustain and work in a democratic and experimental milieu. A strong emphasis is placed on qualities such as dialogue, research, border crossing, and critical thinking, and on valuing complexity, diversity and uncertainty. There is parity of qualification, pay and other conditions with other similar professionals, for example school teachers.

Lastly, there is supply-side funding, with services directly supported with public money. The

OECD Starting strong review outlines a number of practical problems with demand subsidy funding systems, typical of market models, including underfunding, weakened government capacity to steer services, and the possibility parent subsidies may not be used efficiently on behalf of children (OECD 2006: 116–117). But the argument for supply-side funding goes further and deeper: that this is the proper form of funding for key public institutions, serving no single consumer group and purpose but a community and a variety of citizens – children, parents, the wider community – and purposes. Subsidising parents makes sense if early childhood services are treated simply as businesses selling a commodity to a consumer in a market, the consumer-parent being regarded as responsible for his or her child; it makes no sense if these services are treated as places of encounter and collaborative workshops, public spaces that are the expression of a responsibility for children that the public shares with parents.



## Conclusions

No model of service delivery can ever offer the one right and objectively best way; nor will any model function anything like perfectly, even in its own terms, once put to work. Models are born in particular contexts and reflect particular views about how the world is and should be; they are local in origin and political in nature. Ultimately they always fail to encompass the complexities and the contradictions of the world. They also become dated, as the taken-for-granted dominant discourse at one point of time seems to be irretrievably outmoded and strange at another.

Yet despite these qualifications, the models outlined here – but also others not covered – do offer us, as societies and individual citizens, real and important collective choices that need to be addressed and decided upon through democratic politics. Deciding between models matters; so, too, do the deliberations, dialogues and disagreements that produce the decision. A healthy democracy needs the energy and stimulation of decisions that matter, decisions that ask us to consider who we are, what matters to us here and now and in the future, and what we want our societies to be.

Perhaps then the first conclusion to be drawn is the need for democratic societies to value and nurture utopian thought, to support the articulation and discussion of alternative directions, and to promote experimentation exploring how these different directions might be followed.

This is not to say that democratically elected governments should surrender all claims to determine the broad direction of policy; I have argued the need for clear and strong national frameworks. It is to say though that they should recognise the existence of alternatives and leave room for discussion, research, experimentation and evaluation of some (at least) of the alternatives. As well as arguments based on diversity and democracy, there is also a certain expedient case for not putting all policy and practice eggs in one basket.

Yet all too often, policy documents by governments and international organisations reduce alternatives to small points of policy detail, ignoring the need to recognise different paradigms and perspectives, different directions and models and to argue the case for one over others. The UK Government, for example, did not set out alternatives for the future direction of ECEC services in England, then argue the case for its preferred direction; it simply chose and pursued a market model. Pilot projects, too, are often synonymous with how to implement one approach, rather than encouraging diverse experimental cultural projects of childhood. A second conclusion concerns the relationship between models. It is perhaps unavoidable in papers of this kind to present different models, approaches or methods as clear-cut and oppositional binaries: model A is like this, model B like that and never the twain shall meet. But in practice things are usually messier. A model can

be applied in a variety of forms, and there are examples in the real world where distinctions blur and black/white differences on paper look greyer in reality; while democracy involves an element of negotiation and compromise – or at least finding some common ground.

Are markets and democratic experimentation wholly incompatible? Unger argues for democracy, experimentalism – and markets and competition, though with strong qualifications: “The quarrel of the left cannot be with the market ... [but] the left must deny the natural and necessary character of the existing form of the market. ... The basic impulse of the left should be: markets yes, free civil society yes, representative democracy yes” (Unger 2005b: 178). He sees an important role for private providers, as “the organisation of co-operative activity among small and medium-sized producers who also compete with one another” (Unger 2002: lxxxvii).

While he argues for the role of markets, but in a particular context, and for the contribution of private provider, again in a conditional way, he also offers an original prescription for the role of government and is critical of crude privatisation. He rejects the idea that government should simply privatise service provision, being reduced to regulating the activities of profit-driven providers of services within a market model: “Europeans should refuse to choose between mass provision of low quality, standardised service by governmental bureaucracies and the profit-driven privatisation of public service” (Unger 2007: 80). Instead government

should actively help to “produce new social agents who can provide those services competitively and differentially in a form which is both customised and innovative” (Unger 2005a: 179), encouraging and supporting experimental provision and, in his term, democratising the market. Further, it should monitor and propagate the most successful experiments.

But, government has another role. It should also provide services itself and not merely as a residual provider of last resort: “The state provides directly only those services which are too innovative, too difficult or too unrewarded by the market to be provided directly ... direct provision of social services becomes the ceiling, not the floor” (Unger 2005a: 179). Elsewhere he argues for the government to act as “a vanguard” in the provision of public services, “developing experimentally new services or new ways of providing old services” (Unger 2005b: 86). Although Unger offers no examples himself, the role played by the municipal government in Reggio Emilia immediately springs to mind.

The role Unger envisages for the market, therefore, is substantially qualified, and is far from the market model of neoliberalism; indeed, he is very aware of the many forms that market economies can assume and particularly critical of that form that has come to be dominant in ‘the North Atlantic World’. He wants to find ways of combining co-operation and competition; to diversify the supply side, including public providers and a wide range of non-profit private organisations; and to situate the market in a democratic context. It is not enough, he

says, to regulate the market, it needs to be redefined. The guiding principle is not consumer choice but “experimental diversification on the basis of a loose set of associations between government and non-government initiatives” (Unger 2005b: 87).

Unger here holds out the possibility of some form of reconciliation between markets and democracy, a possibility meriting further research and discussion. Others, however, argue a fundamental contradiction. For example, Carr and Hartnett (1996), with whose comment I began this paper, are unwavering: “Any vision of education that takes democracy seriously cannot but be at odds with educational reforms which espouse the language and values of market forces.” So too is Apple (2005): “Public institutions are the defining features of a caring and democratic society. ... [M]arkets are to be subordinate to the aim of producing a fuller and thicker participatory democratic polity and daily life” (Apple 2005: 18).

Perhaps an element of competition, *de jure* or *de facto*, is inevitable, unless a service system runs on the basis of random allocation of children to ECEC services, removing any element of parents’ (or children’s) say in the matter – an unlikely prospect in a liberal democracy. Competition may also occur between different experimental projects, even if it is the non-commercial competition of researchers anxious to make the most original and exciting discoveries or seeking to be the first to achieve some common goal. But having acknowledged competition may figure in both models, like choice,

another term held in common, the meaning of the term is very different.

There is, I think, a difference between competition as a predominant value and acting as a method of discipline to the point of some ‘suppliers’ going under; and competition as good-natured rivalry and friendly comparison in a system that prioritises values of collaboration and support. A system based on survival of the fittest differs qualitatively from a system based on the collective strength of networks. Even in the latter system some children and parents will choose to use different services than the majority in their community, perhaps because they are drawn to another direction or form of experimentation. But services working with democratic experimentalism should be responsive enough to their local communities and participatory enough in their working practices to ensure that most families act on what most families now say: that what they really want is a ‘good’ local service, not market choice – only in this case with most families being actively engaged in creating and evaluating a collective view of ‘good’.

There is, then, a world of difference between a system which takes competition and individual choice as central values; and one that recognises them as having some motivational power, but does not accord them pride of place and seeks to domesticate and direct them in the interests of democracy and experimentation.

Finally, while the market model undoubtedly has momentum at present, impelled in large

part by the rise of neoliberalism over the last generation, it is important to resist an over-determined approach, which can lead to a false sense of inevitability and hopelessness, Unger's "dictatorship of no alternatives" (Unger 2005b: 1). Times – and the zeitgeist – change. What seems necessary and inevitable at one time can become yesterday's story very quickly, just as ideas considered far out to one generation become the next generation's common sense.

More fundamentally, we should beware of ceding hegemony and necessity to any one idea or way of doing things; neoliberalism and its concept of markets are certainly important, and we should recognise their influence on ECEC policies and practices. But they are not universal and alternatives do exist. Gibson-Graham's critique of the centrality of capitalism in economics – what they term 'capitalocentric' thinking – could usefully be adapted and applied as a corrective in ECEC and schooling:

"Yet while there exists a substantial understanding of the extent and nature of economic difference, what does not exist is a way of convening this knowledge to destabilise the received wisdom of capitalist dominance and unleash the creative forces and subjects of economic experimentation. Our intervention has been to propose a language of the diverse economy as an exploratory practice of thinking economy differently in order to perform different economies. The language of the diverse economy widens the identity of the economy to include all of

those practices excluded or marginalised by the theory and presumption of capitalist hegemony."

(Gibson-Graham 2006: xi-xii)

Gibson-Graham call their intervention in debates about capitalism a 'politics of language', and this paper might be seen in the same light; as an exercise in developing new, richer local languages of ECEC and ECEC possibility. Although I have only explored two models, and 'convened' only one example of difference to the market model, I have tried to indicate the potential scope for diversity and experimentation, as well as pointing to just a few examples of practices that risk being excluded or marginalised by the theory and presumption of market thinking.

The market model leads to a well-known destination; in today's neoliberal climate, this destination is widely publicised and the direction clearly signposted. The other destination reported on in this paper, democratic experimentalism, is harder to find and ignored by many, but offers great possibilities. In my view, we need to learn about and from the scattered communities and projects that have already made the journey and are practising democratic experimentalism in some form, and about the directions that need to be taken to get to this destination. That way we can develop not only a politics of language, but also what Gibson-Graham terms a 'politics of collective action', working collaboratively to produce alternative organisations, spaces and practices.

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#### About the Bernard van Leer Foundation

The Bernard van Leer Foundation funds and shares knowledge about work in early childhood development. The foundation was established in 1949 and is based in the Netherlands. Our income is derived from the bequest of Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist, who lived from 1883 to 1958.

Our mission is to improve opportunities for children up to age 8 who are growing up in socially and economically difficult circumstances. We see this both as a valuable end in itself and as a long-term means to promoting more cohesive, considerate and creative societies with equality of opportunity and rights for all.

We work primarily by supporting programmes implemented by partners in the field. These include public, private, and community-based organisations. Our strategy of working through partnerships is intended to build local capacity, promote innovation and flexibility, and help to ensure that the work we fund is culturally and contextually appropriate.

We currently support about 140 major projects. We focus our grantmaking on 21 countries in which we have built up experience over the years. These include both developing and industrialised countries and represent a geographical range that encompasses Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

We work in three issue areas:

- Through "Strengthening the Care Environment" we aim to build the capacity of vulnerable

parents, families and communities to care for their children.

- Through "Successful Transitions: The Continuum from Home to School" we aim to help young children make the transition from their home environment to daycare, preschool and school.
- Through "Social Inclusion and Respect for Diversity" we aim to promote equal opportunities and skills that will help children to live in diverse societies.

Also central to our work is the ongoing effort to document and analyse the projects we support, with the twin aims of learning lessons for our future grantmaking activities and generating knowledge we can share. Through our evidence-based advocacy and publications, we aim to inform and influence policy and practice both in the countries where we operate and beyond.

#### About the Bertelsmann Stiftung

The Bertelsmann Stiftung is dedicated to serving the common good. It executes projects in its four core areas of education, business and social affairs, health, and international relations, and strives to promote peaceful coexistence among the world's diverse cultures. Through the example of its civic engagement, it wants to encourage other individuals and organizations to support their own communities as well. Founded in 1977 as a registered charity, the Bertelsmann Stiftung is majority shareholder of Bertelsmann AG. Structured as a private operating foundation, it is politically non-partisan and works independently of Bertelsmann AG.